Bodies of Resistance: On (Not) Naming Gender in the Medieval West

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
BODIES OF RESISTANCE:
ON (NOT) NAMING GENDER IN THE MEDIEVAL WEST

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation considers the genres of historiography, romance, hagiography, Chaucerian poetry, and court transcripts. While there are no extant manuscripts depicting transgender-like people’s accounts of themselves, literature of the Middle Ages is replete with fictionalized depictions of ambiguously or transgressively gendered individuals who are meant to symbolize or represent something other than themselves. By investigating how a variety of genres depicts sensationalized and transgressively gendered embodiments, I examine the presentation of transgender-like subjectivity as a manipulation of rhetoric. Viviane Namaste critiques theory such as Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests*, claiming that it reduces the transvestite figure to a rhetorical trope and flattens readings of the possibilities for embodied subjectivity. Indeed, many of the medieval texts depicting transgender-like characters also reduce them to rhetorical tropes, symbols of something other than themselves. Accordingly, I simultaneously follow Garber to consider the effects of such symbolization and Namaste to consider the possibility the world of the text also partly reflects embodied subjectivity.

While the treatment of sodomy and the location of alleged sodomites in societies have long been subjects of inquiry, the existence and treatment of transgender-like subjects have been relatively unexplored, particularly in pre-modern periods. To address this aporia, I begin with
Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, the subsequent revisions by Wace and Layamon, and the later-written prequels *Des Grantz Geanz* and *De Origine Gigantum*; the giants imagined to inhabit originally the island that would become Britain are hypertrophically gendered, functioning as uncanny doubles of the humans who are to colonize and eradicate them. The romances of *Sir Gowther, Richard Coer de Lyon*, and the *Roman de Silence* all depict various journeys through transgressive masculinities to form eventually idealized gendered subjects. The various hagiographical accounts of the “cross-dressing” Saint Eugenia depict a person who, through spiritual discipline, transcends female embodiment and becomes a man in the eyes of God and fellow human. Geoffrey Chaucer’s account of the Pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales* famously represents a person of ambiguous sex and gender; by participating in a perverse christomimesis, the Pardoner utilizes ambiguity to perpetuate the system of desire, capitulation, and absolution that fuels the economics of his sale of indulgences. The fifth and final chapter turns to two court cases of the fourteenth-century, those of Eleanor or John Rykener and Rolandina or Rolandinus Ronchaia. The charges brought in these cases seem to be either prostitution or sodomy, yet the complicated gender presentations of the accused—generally but not always female, having been assigned male genders at birth—lead to far more invasive questions about the details of their early lives.

I investigate the persistence of fantasies about non-normative or ambiguous gender, both in literary and historical texts; as such fantasies fuel transgender and transmisogynist stereotypes today, I work to read against the grain in examining the construction and lineage of those myths and fantasies, to expose the history that feeds into fantasy. As such, reading through the subjects of these texts intimates queer possibilities for the future.
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Introduction

Methodology: “Approaching the Archive with Rage”

In my life outside of graduate school, I work for the Trans Youth Equality Forum, which involves running support groups for children from the ages of seven to seventeen. Usually, this part of my life and my academic work are separate from each other. Yet during one support group, one of the children complained that a lot of people think that transgressive gender expression is invalid because it’s a modern invention, with people before the last few decades quite simply having no desire for anything other than a cisgender identity, preferably a heterosexual one at that. While I generally speak only to facilitate the kids’ conversations, this presented a rare opportunity for my knowledge as a medievalist actually to make a difference in these teenagers’ lives. I talked a little bit about Joan of Arc and the cross-dressing saints but wrapped it up quickly, not wanting to make support group into a classroom; the kids, however, were enthralled, and wanted to hear more. By the end of the group session, I had somehow ended up promising them a book that they could arm themselves with against charges that nobody like them ever existed before 1990 or so. I doubt any of them will ever read this dissertation in its current form, but the project began with the desire to address an aporia in the current popular imagination regarding the history of transgender expression and identity.

While I wish I could write the kind of book that I’m sure they would want, perhaps something along the lines of Les Feinberg’s Transgender Warriors, which lists people worldwide dating back several thousand years who appeared to be transgender, such a project would necessitate setting aside historicized readings and theoretical framework. However, while the terms “transgender” and “transsexual” are themselves modern inventions, transgressively
gendered people are not; while Feinberg’s book might not be fully historicized, much in the same way that John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* comes under charges of anachronism, the point is undeniable that transgender-like people have existed across geographic borders long before the coining of terms under the trans umbrella. Judith Bennett makes a similar argument regarding women who preferred to be romantically involved with other women, calling them “lesbian-like.” Tom Linkinen and Ruth Mazo Karras follow Bennett’s model in discussing the transgender-like identity of Eleanor Rykener, whose case, alongside that of Rolandina Ronchaia, is the subject of this dissertation’s final chapter (112). My discussion of transgender-like identities does not assume, then, that any of the subjects I discuss are necessarily proto-transgender ancestors, but rather, their performance of a gendered identity resembles that of transgender identity in at least some ways as we contemporarily understand it.

Despite my idealistic desire to write a dissertation grounded in the voices of transgender-like people from the Middle Ages, the majority of subjects I discuss are not people, but literary inventions. This representation can be attributed to the extant texts of which I am aware, which include very few voices of transgender-like people apart from the two court cases I treat in Chapter Five. In navigating the disjunction between actual and fantasized identities, I have shifted the goal of my project; rather than discuss the implications of self-presentation, I discuss the differences between self-representations of transgressive, ambiguous, and transgender-like subjectivity and fantasized representations in various genres. Much like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s classification of the monster as that which signals something other than itself, transgressive gender often is utilized to signify something other than its own subject’s identity (“Monster Culture” 4). Marjorie Garber makes this same contention about the transvestite figure, arguing that audiences must look at rather than through the transvestite figure to interpret what category
of crisis is being represented (9). Such a framework is a highly effective way of approaching how gendered identity and performance have been fantasized and represented in different genres; the giants of Britain’s creation myths, the heroes of romance poetry, the cross-dressing saints of hagiography, and Chaucer’s Pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales* all represent literary inventions that borrow from the reality of embodied subjectivity.

My methodology is twofold. As the literary inventions which I discuss borrow to a certain extent from historical models, they point to the reality of gendered embodiment. For example, some critics have argued that the Pardoner likely was based on an actual person. Saint Eugenia, despite hagiography’s similarities to romance, is said to have lived during the reign of Emperor Commodus. Richard the Lion Hearted, the eponymous character of the romance *Richard Coer du Lyon*, is a sensationalized version of an historical king. Finally, the court cases taken up in my last chapter discuss what are more than likely two historical figures.¹ I read through these texts for the potential representations of attitudes toward transgressively gendered people. Archaeologist Mary Weismantel argues that approaching an archive from a transgender perspective, as I do in this project, means approaching that archive with rage, as “[t]hat rage has its origins in the many forms of violence—physical and psychological, material and symbolic—inflicted on transgender bodies” (320). Approaching the archive with rage, then, means revealing that violence, much of which comprises “layers of unsupported assumptions about sex and gender that encrust the archaeological record” (320). Indeed, while pre-modern archives might not name transgender people as such, they still can suggest the manners in which gender presentations might have been policed; as K. J. Rawson argues, “historical artifacts collected in various archives … offer fragmented glimpses into the day-to-day lives of people who

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¹ Jeremy Goldberg argues that Eleanor Rykener was likely a literary invention whose trial was constructed to present the efficacy of the courts in condemning sexual transgressions. His argument is unique, as most scholars accept Eleanor Rykener’s existence.
transgressed gender boundaries before such practices were coalesced around transgender identity and community” (24). Especially with texts such as the court cases which describe transgressive genders as something criminal or aberrant, it is important to read with Weismantel’s caution to dig past the “layers of unsupported assumptions” that comprise conceptions of gendered viability.

When reading through texts as archives, both literary and historical, for the implications of bodies that could well have existed, the practice of looking at such figures runs the risk of reducing them to mere rhetorical constructions or tropes. When considering the real implications, or potential reality, of such subjects, I build on work by Valerie Traub, whose concept of “cycles of salience” proves immensely helpful for considering pre-modern subjectivity (21-34). She posits that women-oriented women, perhaps what Bennett dubs lesbian-like women, recur throughout recorded history in correlation with sociopolitical phenomenon, becoming visible at different points in time. Not anachronistically labeling these women’s identities as lesbian, she argues that women with much in common with contemporary lesbians not only have existed before the identity category, but also become visible and known at certain points in time because of conditions rendering them more visible; this does not mean, then, that social conditions create lesbian-like identities and groups, but rather, that they have always existed and become legible because of the conditions produced by social phenomena.2 In a more recent project, she builds on cross-gender identification to think about early modern sexuality, a concept which also proves useful for thinking about medieval constructions and perceptions of gendered embodiment. She writes, “Transiting across identifications from male to female, I drew certain perspectives out of gay male histories and areas of interest in order to elucidate dispositions toward knowledge and

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2 Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills discuss a similar phenomenon in relation to the continuity of conceptions of monstrosity that juxtapose human and animal features. See their introduction to The Monstrous Middle Ages, especially pp. 15-19.
sex that might benefit women” (*Thinking Sex* 267). Similarly, I draw from a broad history of perspectives that allow for a consideration of trans-like identities and representations.

In positioning lesbian historiography as foundational to my discussion of transgender historiography, I am also indebted to Francesca C. Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn’s *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*, which offers a historicized alternative to John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, which focuses largely on men only. Sautman and Sheingorn preface their collection of essays by discussing the role of silence and the lack of language historically available to describe women’s love for each other. They suggest that remaining nameless can signify power reclaimed through resistance to externally imposed categories with their implicit negative assessments and marginalizations. As they write, “We are not charting out a definitional continuum of lesbian identity but rather a history of the range of same-sex behaviors between women that infringe upon and challenge normative expectations as they were lived in the Middle Ages” (4). In considering silence and namelessness sites of power and potential rather than erasure, the editors lay the groundwork for discussing identities and subjectivities not previously discussed. Indeed, Sarah Allison Miller describes medieval masculinist conceptions of women’s bodies as monstrous, arguing that “[b]odies that transgress their proper bounds destabilize the boundaries that structure truth, knowledge, and the universe itself” (43). The concept of transgressive bodies certainly extends to those not aligned with allegedly normative masculine ideals, to those subjectivities which were unnamed and at times unnameable. Thus, Viviane Namaste’s contention that we read beyond depictions of rhetorical tropes and keep in mind embodiment and subjectivity is crucial in continuing to read for potential identity in unnamed spaces.
Gender studies in the Middle Ages have long been topics of critical discussion, and in the last few decades, those critical discussions have opened to questions of same-sex sexuality, largely between men but sometimes, far less frequently, between women. It is only in very recent years that transgender studies have become popular in academia, and indeed, investigations into transgender studies rarely intersect with medieval studies. Trans studies might be relatively new to academic inquiry, articulated as such for the first time in Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto,” published in 1991, in which she pushes back against medically stigmatizing and reductive models of gender such as those espoused by Janice Raymond; she proposes instead that we look past defining “transsexual” identity and that we consider instead new issues “whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (296). In moving forward to consider how medieval studies can contribute to this productive disruption of categories, it becomes apparent that transgender-like people have existed long before John Oliven coined the term “transgender” in 1965 and also before Magnus Hirschfeld coined “Transsexualismus” in 1923. The intersection of transgender studies and medieval studies has been largely understudied, and a consideration of the representations of trans-like subjectivity in the Middle Ages can complicate understandings of the possibilities for gender and its performance. While I find the Middle Ages to be relatively full of trans-like and transgressively gendered subjects and characters, many might be surprised to think of the Middle Ages as a fruitful locus for transgender studies. However, the inaugural issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly, a compilation of keywords for the newly developing field of transgender studies as an academic discipline, includes an entry on the medieval period; Karl Whittington outlines a brief survey of the many medieval instances of gender variance and transgression, including “medieval subjects that relate to the issue [of transgender identity], such as
intersexuality, cross-dressing, and the medical alteration of the sexed body, all of which are discussed in primary sources (126). As many of those primary sources are filtered through biases and stereotypes about transgressive, trans-like, and ambiguous gender identity and performance, I reiterate the importance of Weismantel’s imperative to approach sources with the knowledge that subjectivity is often presented through those biases.

Indeed, I argue throughout this project that trans-like figures are deployed across genres in the same manner as Cohen’s conception of monsters as a means of symbolizing something other than themselves. Concerns with “authentic,” or, biologically essential, gender influence how subjects are represented in terms of their symbolic value. Indeed, as Nihils Rev and Fiona Maeve Geist argue in “Staging the Trans Sex Worker,” “[t]rans identity remains—at least in a labor and material sense—overdetermined given the economically precarious positions many trans people find themselves in and the discrimination to which they are subject. Trans individuals are frequently pathologized as hypersexual if not as potential sex workers” (117). The association of trans identities, and particularly trans women, with hypersexuality, deception, and illicit sexual behavior is a stereotype apparent even in medieval treatment of trans-like subjects. As I argue more fully in their respective chapters, Silence is continually monitored for compliance with gendered norms, while Rolandina Ronchaia and Eleanor Rykener are interrogated not just under suspicion of sodomy or prostitution, but of transgressing traditional gendered roles in daily life as well. The Pardoner, a character who himself boasts of his deceptive behavior, has been infamously studied in terms of his suspicious gender and sexuality.

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3 The grouping of intersex issues under the transgender umbrella is a contentious one; while intersex subjects are not readily categorized as male or female, many do not consider themselves transgender, although some do. I discuss medieval intersex issues, such as those at times ascribed to Chaucer’s Pardoner, as related to transgressive genders because of their location outside of a gendered binary; however, the issue of identity is a personal one, and both my methodological approach and Whittington’s definition should not be construed as representative of intersex or transgender identity as a whole.
Indeed, gendered compliance continually functions as a means of insight into moral character and ideal subjectivity; the murderous actions of Albina and her sisters are presented in juxtaposition with the single sister who remains loyal to her husband, while the spiritual masculinity of the so-called transvestite saint Eugenia contrasts with the sinful carnality and seduction of Melancia. Thus, with Bhanji’s critique of the consumption of trans identities and Namaste’s impulse to read against the symbolization and erasure of identities, I examine the potential for authentic self-representation in various narratives. As Rev and Geist argue, there is a “rich history of trans sex work as a site of agency and resistance integral to the formation of trans cultures and social networks” (118). As such, I consider the ways that representations of trans-like subjects, including and in addition to those engaging in sex work, can suggest modes of resistance to stereotypes and erasure.

The rapidly developing discipline of transgender studies is thus central to this project, and I form my methodology from considering the intersections of queer studies, transgender studies, and medieval studies. Heather Love discusses the overlaps and distinctions between lesbian and gay studies, queer studies, and the rapidly developing discipline of transgender studies:

In distinction to both gay and lesbian studies and sexuality studies, queer studies defines itself as a critical field that questions stable categories of identity. Transgender studies also identifies itself against identity, offering a challenge to the perceived stability of the two-gender system. Whether and in what context these fields should be seen as distinct is a live question; however, queer and transgender are linked in their activist investments, their dissident methodologies, and their critical interrogation of and resistance to gender and sexual norms. (172)
This activist investment is key for my approach to the texts in this dissertation; while my goal is not to rescue all the characters from charges of deviance or criminality—Chaucer’s Pardoner himself, for instance, boasts of his own criminality—, I am invested in readings that consider not how gender signifies morality, but how gender was perceived and represented according to different biases or stereotypes in particular contexts. Indeed, a recent roundtable discussion reproduced in “Trans* Political Economy Deconstructed: A Roundtable Discussion” discusses the experiences of trans and gender non-conforming individuals regarding their navigation of and circulation within the political economy. The discussion calls into consideration how value is ascribed—or not—to trans individuals in working to achieve economic justice. While the concerns of the authors are contemporary, they raise important issues for studying the deployment of trans-like subjects across genres; how are different genres utilizing or representing trans-like and ambiguously gendered subjectivities in service of their stories? Nael Bhanji asks, “How are trans bodies subsumed within rhetorics of authenticity and, therefore, consumption?” (21). In raising questions about how trans labor is ultimately consumed in service of lesbian and gay liberation, Bhanji’s question helps navigate medieval presentations of transgression and ambiguity and their relationships to “authentic” and idealized subjectivities.

While Namaste’s critique of queer theory as tending to reduce identity and embodiment to the realm of the symbolic is an important one, particularly in considering possibilities for historical subjectivity, queer theory is not limited to reading texts only for symbolic resonance and is thus simultaneously crucial for this project; as literary depictions or inventions, the texts’ characters are positioned as rhetorical tropes and symbolic figures, which can begin to provide insight into popular perceptions of sex and gender. Garber ventures the claim that “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that
intervenes, not just a category crisis of male or female, but the crisis of category itself” (17). In examining what those category crises might be, she encourages us to learn by looking at the transvestite figure. As Namaste observes, Garber’s critical approach implies that “the transvestite is an effect of performance and nothing else, … a mere tropological figure” (189). In other words, such a gaze reads a person as a symbol. I take a twofold approach in following the seemingly contradictory methodologies of Namaste and Garber, which enables the discussion of literary texts representing subjects who are simultaneously both constructed tropes and representations of subjects. Indeed, even the court cases involving Rykener and Ronchaia depict them in a sensationalized manner through the filter of criminal activity. This treatment of people of transgender experience as rhetorical constructions, as symbols, as not-quite-human, is not uncommon, and reading the ways that texts utilize their characters in such manners suggests important characteristics of the societies in which they circulate. For instance, in the Roman de Silence, the eponymous character is assigned a female sex at birth but raised as a boy to circumvent a ban on female inheritance. However, rather than act according to their own desires for gender, the character is portrayed as behaving solely in response to other characters’ desires. While I discuss this text in more detail in the chapter on romance, I offer it as a brief example of the way transgender-like characters are figured as tropes or plot devices, symbols of a crisis elsewhere, but not autonomously thinking or fully fleshed-out characters. This literary treatment of characters translates into the world outside the manuscript, too, which motivates Namaste’s critique that queer theory often invites a flattening of embodied experience as transgender existence becomes read as a symbol and not a life.

In a style that could be described as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s practice of reading reparatively, Boswell’s Christianity, Homosexuality, and Social Tolerance pushes back against
the idea that religious belief, including Christianity, has always been a vehicle of persecution for gay people and thus resists the reduction of the embodied experience of queer sexuality to the mere symbol of an outsider. While it drew considerable backlash for its implicit reliance on anachronism in tracing the lineage of a gay identity, the book’s contention that there have always been people who might have identified in a particular way, had that identity category been available to them, helps shape my own argument. Rather than argue for the existence of transgender identity before the coining of the term, I follow Traub’s model of the cycles of salience in considering the existence and persistence of gender performances that seem to resonate with more contemporary conceptions of transgender identity. Similarly, Carolyn Dinshaw pursues a project that presents the existence of a transhistorical queer community, as she looks for the resonances between medieval and modern queer identity; these “vibrations,” as she calls them, are the points of overlap that make up “a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now” (1).

The Individual and the Collective: Gendered Subjectivities

In considering the implications of literary depictions of transgressively gendered subjects, this dissertation focuses on the uneasy desire for and potency of gendered transgression and ambiguity across various modes of writing. Such deployment figures normative identity, both national and personal, against the figure of the differently gendered transgressor, who must be either reformed or repudiated. Accordingly, the bodies of individuals become integral measures of how collective identity is formed, as a sense of belonging correlates to subjectivity. Medieval
borders did not, of course, delineate land in the same fashion as modern nations do; the formation of territories we now call the nations of Britain and France was a rather lengthy process, and indeed, not the subject of this project. Yet, the desire for ambiguity and transgression is central to many myths of an ethnic group or territory’s foundation and civilization; while medieval *mappae mundi* cast giants and the rest of the monstrous races to the farthest borders of geography and the recesses of history, those monsters show up again and again at the hearts of foundation myths. Whether the giants are slain to make way for human governance or buried underneath the accruing layers of temporal sediment, their lives recur repeatedly, finding new instantiations in multiplying versions of myths, inscribed nominally in geographic formations, memorialized in statue form. The monsters, then, just won’t die, like Frankenstein’s creature disappearing over the ice floes or Grendel slouching back to the misty moors weeping over his bloody stump of a shoulder. They linger at the edges of our consciousness, exiled and sentenced to apparent death, but they always find their way back.4

This continual resurrection means that instead of the monsters being exiled from proper society, they become necessary for forging a group identity. Britain becomes viable territory for humans when Brutus and his men, according to myth, clear the land of the giants, firmly fixing humans as superior and dominant. Yet what does this formation mean for collective identity when the monsters just keep coming back, invited and imagined by the same groups of people who sought to exile them?

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen discusses this process of collective identity formation, contending that,

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4 Dana Oswald describes this phenomenon of desirable monstrosity, as humans want both to witness and control bodies which they find strange by inscribing them on manuscript pages (1-2).
like personhood and gender, [it] is substantiated though repetition and citation. It is therefore best described as bodily praxis, as an interminable process of embodiment. [...] A medieval nation need be nothing more than a group of people linked by their common descent (consanguinitas), since nation and its vernacular equivalents derive ultimately from the Latin verb nasci, ‘to be born.’

(Hybridity 13)

Similarly, Patricia Clare Ingham, following Ernst Kantorowicz’s ideas on sovereign sempiternity, has discussed medieval ideas of nationhood as what, following Benedict Anderson, she argues might be more aptly called imagined communities (4). Cohen’s and Ingham’s discussions of the self-conscious and imagined nature of the collective identity of a medieval “nation” are thus fundamental to my focus: the gendered biases and desires that paradoxically inform that fantasy of a collective unity. Cohen’s discussion of the development of national identity develops from Judith Butler’s theory of gender as something that is substantiated through repetition and citation (“Imitation” 311); their theories, then, suggest the parallels between national identity and gendered identity. The body of the human and the body of the nation depend on one another, and so it follows that questions of cultural belonging would be concerned with configurations of gender. Those bodies marked as monstrous often are imagined as an amalgam of human and non-human parts. Yet the giants central to foundation myths are more than human, their gendered performances verging on the perverse. That these bodies

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5 See, for example, Isidore of Seville’s Etymologiae, in which he characterizes these seemingly monstrous births as portents, of which he notes, “Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature—but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator” (XI.iii.1). He includes a wide array of examples, including a “monster to which a woman gave birth, whose upper body parts were human, but dead, while its lower body parts came from diverse animals, yet were alive” (XI.iii.5), a person who “covered nine jugers (i.e. about six acres) when lying prostrate; in other cases in the form of a smallness of the whole body as in dwarfs (nanus) or those whom the Greeks call pygmies (pygmaeus) because they are a cubit tall” (XI.iii.7). Indeed, this brief sample demonstrates the broad array of beings characterized as portents, which includes those who are overly or underly human in size and those who are both human and animal in physical form.
become monstrous because of their excess points to their disruptive potential; they are banished from society because of their refusal to fit yet quietly welcomed back repeatedly because of their expansion, their reminder that borders can be shattered more easily than they can be repaired.

In foregrounding the complications of forming the borders that delineate the edges of a human and of a nation, it is important to consider a brief history of the birthing process of that subjective formation. In other words, how did giants and other monsters come to accrue such cultural capital? How did certain ideals come to be valued in the formation of the ideal subject? The details presented as gendered ideals in particular narratives, such as human governance over nature or masculinist domination over the boundless wild, certainly suggest which characteristics were desirable for collective subjectivities. Yet, as this project argues, those characteristics become desirable only because of the necessity of other foundational characteristics portrayed as less than ideal or perhaps even loathsome. Importantly, Rene Girard discusses the scapegoat in terms of its construction:

Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator. It bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body.

(15)

This means that a scapegoat implicitly reveals far more about the preconceptions and fears of the persecutors than about the scapegoat itself. However, while the persecution of a scapegoat imagines the victim, bearing all the collective sins of a society, to be exiled completely, that victim, in these myths, lingers outside the gates, waiting for the moment when the gates open to
usher the victim back in quietly. Rather than functioning, then, as a scapegoat to be banished or as an outsider to be excised in the name of reifying territorial borders, ambiguously or transgressively gendered behavior seems to be continually present across a wide variety of genres, suggesting the desirability of maintaining such transgressions as necessary, if marginalized, components of an ideal society.

Importantly, the projected identity is generally one that equates masculinity with ideal subjectivity, and so the biases that inform this masculinist image often are far from utopian; while re-centering gendered ambiguity and transgressions of normatively sexed and gendered behavior can be productive in terms of understanding empire-building, it also calls attention to those moments when ambiguity and transgression can be predatory and chauvinistic. This is not to say that all ambiguously gendered or transgressive behavior is malicious. Rather, fixing “monstrous,” or non-normative, sex and gender at the foundation of a society and its mythology can also push back against masculinist and binarist conceptions of ideal subjectivity. These moments work in distinction to the more egregious violations and abuses of boundaries that sacrifice particular bodies to make way for the masculinist illusion of a unified nation. This project examines both types of moment, as both push concepts of idealized borders to utilize the potency of transgression. It also, then, differentiates between the two, as one reifies masculinist illusions of unified subjectivity and the other undermines that fantasy, revealing that image of unified subjectivity as masculinist fantasy.

_The Liber monstrorum: Separating Truth from Lies_

I discuss this concept in more detail as it works in different genres in the following chapters. In introducing the concept in more general terms, I begin with a text that far predates
the subsequently discussed texts: the Liber monstrorum, a seventh- or eighth-century compendium concerned with parsing out truth from lies in the rumors about monstrous and fantastical creatures said to exist in the world. As its main sources are such classical accounts as Pliny’s Historia Naturalis and the Wonders of the East tradition, widely accepted in early medieval discourse, the text is an important gateway for considering the beginnings of subjective self-definition in the early years of Britain’s formation (Orchard 86-87). Following Traub’s

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6 The catalogue of monsters is divided into the three distinct sections of “De Monstris,” “De Beluis,” and “De Serpentibus,” which are preceded by a Praefatio. The text is extant in five manuscripts, some of which are partial and some complete: MS Gudianus lat. 148 (Wolfenbüttel, Eastern Francia, Herzog-August Bibliothek); Voss. lat., MS Oct. 60 (Leiden, Fleury. Bibliotheca der Rijks-Universiteit); MS 237 (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek); MS 906, or, the Rosanbo Manuscript (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library); and MS Royal 15.B.XIX (London, British Library). The manuscript at Wolfenbüttel, written in Carolingian miniscule on parchment, contains the Prognostics of St. Julian of Toledo (d. 690), Aesop’s Fables, a Latin translation of the Physiologus, and the preface as well as the complete text of the Liber monstrorum. It has been dated to the ninth-century, and originates from what is now eastern Germany. The manuscript at Leiden, written similarly in Carolingian miniscule on parchment, originates from the Benedictine monastery at Fleury Abbey in the Loiret, and is autographed by the scribe Pulhiarius Monacus (d. early 10th c.). It contains an Incipit, “De Monstris,” and “De Beluis,” but does not contain the third section, “De Serpentibus,” or the beginning of the Praefatio. The St. Gallen manuscript, written on vellum, is dated to the late ninth-century, and originates from the Benedictine Abbey at St. Gall in present-day Switzerland. It eliminates the Praefatio and contains only the first section of the rest of the Liber, “De monstris.” The manuscript also contains, following “De Monstris,” three letters from Isidore of Seville (d. 636) to Saint Braulio, Bishop of Zaragoza (d. 651), two of Braulio’s letters to Isidore, twenty chapters of Isidore’s Etymologiae including illuminations of the solar cycle and a world map, the Lord’s Prayer in Latin and Greek letters, and the Greek, Scythian, and possibly the Slavic alphabets. The Pierpont Morgan Library’s manuscript originates from Rheims and has been dated to the ninth century. The manuscript is written in Carolingian miniscule, and begins with the Fables of Phaedrus. The manuscript contains the Liber monstrorum in part, featuring “De monstros” and “De beluis,” but only the ending of the Praefatio and none of “De Serpentibus.” The British Museum’s manuscript, dated to the ninth- or tenth-century, is written in Carolingian miniscule on vellum, and originates from Rheims. It contains the Satirae of Persius (d. 62 AD), several works of Bede (d. 735), as well as three texts of verse and prose concerning animals and monsters: “De generibus uocem” which consists of a table of animals’ noises and is drawn from Aldhelm’s Liber de septenario et de metris, the epigram “Exempla auteni” of unknown authorship, and the Praefatio and fragments of “De Monstris” of the Liber monstrorum. The text was bound later, during the reign of Charles II, between the poems of Sedulius and an eleventh-century manuscript containing the poems of Symposius and Saint Boniface.

The manuscript tradition of the text thus suggests that its circulation was likely restricted to the intellectual elite, both Insular and Continental. Its placement with medical texts, fables, and poetry suggests its use in both physiological as well as more philosophical endeavors. The presence of fables from both Aesop and Phaedra in the manuscripts at the Wolfenbüttel and Pierpont Morgan Libraries points specifically to a moralizing context, beyond the more physical and anatomical concerns of physiological and medical texts. The prefacing of the Wolfenbüttel manuscript with Saint Julian’s Prognosticium Futuri Saeculi reinforces this moralizing context by expressing a concern with the soul and the afterlife. Similarly, the British Museum’s manuscript’s binding with the Satires of Persius suggests this concern with virtue, in addition to the merely physical; Persius’s first Satire criticizes moral decay in Rome, as he laments of its politicians that “Auriculas asini quis non habet” (I.121, ed. Edward Weist). The contents of the St. Gallen manuscript further suggest a concern with morality and order; the letters exchanged between Isidore of Seville and Saint Braulio discuss the restoration of order within the Church as well as the regularizing of ecclesiastical discipline. The binding and circulation of the Liber monstrorum along with texts concerned with virtue, morality, and order suggests that it would have been read, too, in such a context.
concept of the cycles of salience, I introduce this project by way of the *Liber* for the insight into views on transgressive gender that the text’s primary concern with the boundaries of the human body can provide. As I discuss more fully below, the first subject that the *Liber* discusses is an ambiguously sexed and gendered individual living alongside other people, not at the margins of the world like the rest of the rumored individuals and races. The overall text defines the category of human by comparing it to all of those allegedly monstrous races and individuals, and importantly begins with an individual whose sex and gender call into question their potential to qualify as fully human. In doing so, it registers gender as being of utmost importance for defining normativity and normality; gender thus becomes a critical category for determining collective identity, as its borders are monitored for evidence of sufficient adherence to binary norms.

While it is perhaps not surprising that the author of the *Liber monstrorum* is concerned first and foremost with a “monstrous” individual in his own society, it is also productive to consider how many other texts make monsters, and more specifically, subjects whose genders are presented as somehow monstrous, integral to the foundation of society. As the *Liber monstrorum* attempts to parse out truth from lies in discussing all of the unbelievable creatures at the edges of the world, it sets the terms by which the reader, located comfortably in the “center” of the world, can measure what it means to participate as a human within a particular society. In describing the history of how particular societies came to be, the *Liber monstrorum* as well as the texts discussed in subsequent chapters reflects the construction of models of proper subjectivity; both construct the terms by which subjects become members: What makes a human English? What makes an English person properly male or female? What makes a human a viable sociopolitical subject, or indeed, human at all?
By the time that the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, or in English, *The Book of Monsters of Diverse and Various Kinds*, began circulating in the seventh- or eighth-century, monster discourse was already quite popular in the Middle Ages, thus necessitating a text like the *Liber monstrorum*, which sets out to solve once and for all whether or not such monstrous myths should be believed. For over one thousand years before the earliest manuscripts of the *Liber monstrorum*, attributed (probably erroneously) to Aldhelm of Malmesbury, travelers outside of the European West had been reporting all the simultaneously enthralling and horrid creatures and races in existence beyond the borders of proper continental civilization. The alleged first Greek visitor to India, Scylax (d. 6th c. BC), seems to have been the main source for the *Indika* of Ktesias (d. 5th c. BC), who himself never traveled to India, but instead, remained situated at Sousa, a geographic gateway to the East located east of the Tigris River in the Iranian Empire.

In the millennium between Scylax’s visit to India and the circulation of the *Liber monstrorum*, fantasies about the monstrous beings inhabiting the edges of the earth proliferated. The Astomi nourished themselves with the pleasant scent of apples and could die from catching any particularly nasty airborne odor. The Blemmyae had heads that grew in the middle of their chests. The Donestre would lurk by the sides of roads and enthrall unwitting visitors, mimicking their speech and lulling them into a false sense of complacency shortly before gobbling them up and weeping over the remainders of their heads. While kernels of truth can be traced in these fantastical depictions, most rumors of monstrous beings accrued increasingly fantastical and

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7 Lapidge discusses evidence, especially orthographical, for the date and authorship of the original manuscript (282-99).
8 According to Herodotus, in 515 BCE, King Darius I of Persia sent Scylax of Caryanda down the Indus River to discover where it went. In tracing its course, Scylax recorded the contours of the land and the sights he encountered all the way down to Suez in north-eastern Egypt at the western end of the Red Sea (*Histories* 4.44).
9 See Rossi-Reder, “Wonders of the Beast: Medieval Monsters and Xenophobes” (24-27).
lurid details. Indeed, Aristotle writes in his Poetics that “that which excites wonder and surprise is pleasant to people, as may be seen from the fact that everyone, when relating [such incidents] makes additions because he thinks they are pleasing” (53). In considering the proliferation of such monstrous discourse, it’s not hard to imagine why these fantastic creatures became such a popular topic of discussion; dwelling at the edges of the world, prowling about the borders between Western European civilization and the unbound, imagined wild beyond the cities, these fantasized creatures were simultaneously a source of lurid horror and indulgent fantasy. They could be scapegoats onto which the European West could displace trepidation about the fragility of their own humanness, and they could be sources of endless entertainment for people who might not otherwise travel beyond the borders of their own neighborhoods.

Certainly the pleasure of storytelling and near-pornographic concentration on accrued embodied details cannot be overstated; and yet, what is more productive to consider in terms of constructing normative subjectivity are the particular types of details ascribed to creatures and people outside of “proper” Western Europe. While those aforementioned Astomi and Donestre, for instance, could certainly enthral an audience in the same way a realistically constructed science fiction flick might today, more important for discussion were those individuals and races who differed from the norm by limited, if not infinitesimal degrees. Indeed, as John Block

10 John Block Friedman has traced the roots of some of these origins in The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought; for example, there was a certain tribe in North Africa that painted faces on their shields, thus leading them to resemble, from a distance, men with heads growing beneath their shoulders.

11 This construction of a “proper” Western Europe means that those people and races imagined to be monstrous are, most often, discussed in relation to their location at the world’s geographic peripheries. Yet they also can be peripheral in terms of their relation to normative constructions of subjectivity, such as the “virtual Jew” within England’s borders (see Tomasch). On the construction of Europe itself, see Bartlett’s The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950-1350, which aptly begins with the point that “Europe is both a region and an idea” (1).

12 See Jonathan Dollimore’s Sexual Dissidence, particularly 92-94; Dollimore discusses Magnus Hirschfeld’s research on homosexuality and his goal to shift homosexuality away from its association with evil. In doing so, Hirschfeld inadvertently helped fuel Nazi ideology that viewed homosexuals as an identifiable minority. Freud, in turn, argued for the social value of homosexuals, and yet “this move, like the difference theory of Hirschfeld, could
Friedman contends, “the people introduced to the West by Ctesias, Megasthenes, and Pliny were perceived as monstrous because they did not look like western Europeans or share their cultural norms. Some of these races, like the Blemmyae and the Astomi, were physically anomalous; others differed in speech, diet, social custom, or modes of defense” (34). These are apt guidelines for discussing the typical Plinian monstrous races and even those ethnic groups who differed significantly from what was familiar to the Christian West.

Yet, when the atypical subject differed from the normative one by so little as to be imperceptible, new ways of rendering difference visible had to be devised, new terms by which difference could be amplified and made discernable. Sylvia Tomasch discusses this phenomenon of difference-construction in terms of the discourse surrounding the “virtual Jew”; after violent encounters between the European Christians and Muslims, Christian Europe began to associate Jews with those Muslim “others,” thus justifying acts of violence against them as well. This perception, Tomasch argues, meant that “for the sake of security, Jews had to be removed; for the sake of self-definition, ‘the Jew’ had to remain” (70-71). Tomasch’s discussion of the stereotypical discourse surrounding “the Jew” is similarly productive for considering discourse surrounding those individuals barely differing from the norm, and certainly still human, but with their differences amplified to make them different. The ways that transgressive genders are represented in the following chapters range from the literally monstrous, such as Sir Gowther’s canine masculinity, to the made-different, such as occurs with Silence, Rykener, and Ronchaia.

The Astomi and the Donestre and all the other wonders of the East remain in the East, but ethnic and religious others as well as anatomically atypical humans clash with and crop up within the Christian West. What emerges in discourse, mythology, and various literary texts is an also intensify rather than allay anxieties: the deviant is made uncomfortably like, indistinguishable from, and even, in individual cases, apparently better than ourselves” (93).
inward tendency of monstrosity, a slowly encroaching motion of those monsters, banished to the edges of the earth, but continually returning closer to the borders of nations in formation until they become lodged in the foundations of the very myths undergirding their nativities. Those races and subjects that seemed monstrous become integral to identity beyond defining simply what one is not. While there remains in these texts a sense of alterity between the European self and the monstrous other, that alterity rapidly becomes uncanny as the self and the other collapse. Indeed, what happens when the “other” is all too human, too similar to the Christian European, and the categories of difference shift away from physical and fantastical monstrosity? The Liber monstrorum not only invites us, but demands us, to consider what happens if monsters are defined in terms of their differences from humans, or when the monstrous is a human assemblage. How does concern with the boundaries of gender come to supersede concerns with the boundaries of the human body in terms of defining human and national subjectivities?

While the Liber monstrorum de Diuersis generibus predates the majority of high to late medieval texts and documents discussed in this dissertation, its proximity both to the earlier Plinian tradition and to the later Norman Conquest marks it as a lynchpin; not only does it resonate with discussions of national formation because of the transition from Anglo-Saxon to high medieval England, it marks, too, an early point of interest in tracing enduring concerns with gendered ambiguity and atypical sexual anatomy at the heart of the forming nation. An initial discussion of this earlier text alongside the Plinian tradition of monster discourse, then, provides a foundation for discussing ambiguity in terms of its endurance across temporal periods and geographies.

The “hominem ... de utriusque sexus”: Gendered Normativity and the Outskirts of the Human
The *Liber monstrorum*, in its preface, registers an intense concern with proliferative fantasies of monsters whose existence is, according to its author, *now* no longer to be believed, marking the contemporary subject as a rational one, able to parse out truth from lies. By making visual discernment an important factor in evaluating the truth, individual subjects become arbiters of normativity and humanity; in a model of social policing of gender, people come under scrutiny for their gendered embodiment and evaluated for performing sufficiently feminine or masculine identities. The *hominem … de utriusque sexus*, ambiguously described as embodying both categories, becomes the locus of scrutiny for the category of human, the primary example in the catalogue of a liminally, if at all, human subject. While the *homo* is one of the only ambiguously gendered subjects in the text, save for the Amazonian race described later in the catalogue, the *homo* is also the only subject with no specific source in one of the earlier Plinian manuscripts; indeed, the author notes that this is an individual that he has seen with his own eyes, and significantly, this is the only individual to which he bears personal witness. This reinforces the primacy of visual discernment in the text’s rhetorical structure as well as its concern with maintaining the category of the human primarily through the category of gender.

Overall, the text thus sets out to give a definitive response to the question, asked presumably by a church official, of whether people should believe everything that they hear about monstrous discourse, and that answer is one that reorients visual witness, rather than reliance on textual authority, as being of utmost priority. After having framed the purpose of the ensuing text, the preface continues on to condemn popular gullibility:

Whilst discussion of these things once shone almost everywhere for humankind as if with the brightness of a lofty star through the authority of many writings, I should have thought that those lies were unrepeateable to anyone, if the gust of
your request had not cast me from the high poop quivering amongst the monsters of the deep. For I compare this task with the dark sea, since there is no clear way of testing whether that rumour which has spread throughout the world with the gilded speech of marvellous report is true or steeped in lies; of which things the writings of the poets and philosophers, which always foster lies, expound the greatest part. (Orchard 254-56)\textsuperscript{13}

This preface suggests the dangers of rumor overcoming truth as well as the corruptibility of written authority; it gazes back to a time in the undefined past when written texts not only could establish authority by reference, but also could \textit{be believed} on the basis of that very referential authority. Now, that “lofty star” of authority has been drenched by the overwhelming tide of the “dark sea,” teeming with monsters and the “gilded speech of marvellous report.” Those poets and philosophers are now no longer to be believed, and so instead, the \textit{Liber monstrorum} asks its readers to question the credibility of a millennium of textual authority and to think about truth in terms of what can be witnessed and assessed.

The remainder of the text catalogues all manner of monstrous individuals and races, situating them safely in the realms of pure fiction or distant past; the credibility of the Blemmyae and Donestre is reduced to pure rumor while the giants said to roam the wild are long since dead and buried. Indeed, the author distances himself from nearly all of the individuals and races described, employing such verb constructions as “it has been said” or “I have been told.”\textsuperscript{14} Such

\textsuperscript{13} Edition from Orchard, \textit{Pride and Prodigies}, Appendix IIIa [“Et dum sermo de his per multarum scripturarum auctoritatum uelud excelsi sideris fulgore olim humano generi paene ubique refuisit, mendacia ea nemini iteranda putasse nisi me uentus tuae postulationis a puppi praecelsa pauidum inter marina precipitasset monstra. Ponto namque tenebroso hoc opus aequiopero, quod probandi si sinsin tuaa instructa mendacio, nullus patet accessus eaque per orbem terrarum aurato sermone miri rumoris fama dispergebat, quorum maximam par tem philosophorum et poeta rum scripturae demonstrat, quae semper mendacia nutrit.”]

\textsuperscript{14} As I have discussed above, most of the \textit{Liber} is based on accounts of monstrous races from classical transmissions. See Orchard’s Appendix IIIc on the sources and analogues for a complete account. For discussions of individuals rather than races, the author of the \textit{Liber} uses phrases such as “I have heard,” rather than bearing
a model of narration resituates the transmission of authority in the realm of witness; the things that we have been told are no longer to be unquestioningly believed.

However, this rubric of monstrous falsity is troubled by the one unsettling individual at the very beginning of the text whose existence calls into question the very category of gender in arbitrating viable models of humanity. Before diving into the more traditional monsters reported over the last millennium to reside on the fringes of the world, the Liber monstrorum opens its catalogue with an account that claims to bear witness to having seen and known a “hominem…de utriusque sexus,” living and working alongside everyone else in a fairly banal fashion. This ambiguously sexed and gendered person is the single subject in the Liber monstrorum’s catalogue of fiction that is held up as an exception to the general rule that the existence of such monstrous and marvelous beings is not to be believed. Indeed, the preface allows that such beings might once have existed, but the time of the humans has come, thus eradicating improperly human forms:

For first the discussion takes its beginning with those things which differ by a rather trifling amount from humankind, paying heed to the individuals that the earth, the mother of mortals, spawns, or is said once to have spawned, because now, when humankind has multiplied and the lands of the earth have been filled, fewer monsters are produced under the stars, and we read that in most of the corners of the world they have been utterly eradicated and overthrown by them, and now, cast out from the shores, they are thrown down to the waves, and that by the churning from the steep summit of the pole they turn from the edge of the witness. For example, he writes, “We have heard of a person born in Asia from human parents with a monstrous mixture. He was like his father in the feet and stomach, but had two chests and four hands and two heads” [I.8: “Et quondam hominem in Asia natum ab humanis parentibus monstrosa commixtione didicimus: qui pedibus et uentre fuit genitori compar, sed tamen dua pectora quattuor manus et bina capita habuit.”].

15 “A man [or person] of both [or either] sex.”
entire circle and from every place on earth towards this vast abyss of the flood.

(Orchard 256-57)\textsuperscript{16}

In a reversal of its initial concerns with the floods of monstrosity (both in terms of “improper” bodily forms \textit{and} the monstrous flood of human lies and rumors) dampening the illuminations of textual authority, the \textit{Liber monstrorum} insists on the supremacy of human perception in arbitrating the chaotic mixture of who gets to join the ranks of humanity; the multiplication of humankind reigns dominant, and those monsters encroaching upon the shores of humanity are “thrown down to the waves.” Perhaps alluding to the Flood of the Old Testament, the \textit{Praefatio} connotes the destruction of sin, as the Flood would have wiped out humanity, save for the model subjects of Noah and his family. Indeed, it advocates that the human form be monitored not only for evidence of non-human monstrosity, but that even within the human race, bodies must comply with standard gendered categories and adhere to principles of morality. The \textit{Liber’s} inclusion of the “hominem … de utriusque sexus” as its very first example of a monstrous creature suggests that, above all else, adherence to a single binary gender and its normative performance is imperative for joining the ranks of the human; particularly given the note that the author bears witness to having seen this person, the text affords the \textit{hominem} a measure of humanity in asserting factual existence and simultaneously dehumanizes them by rendering their gendered subjectivity illegible.

The \textit{Liber monstrorum} is fairly anthropocentric and conservative in terms of its general framework for arbitrating the guidelines for personhood and subjectivity, and yet, its initial account of that “hominem … de utriusque sexus” remains troubling in terms of the clear-cut

\textsuperscript{16} Orchard, p. 256-57 [“Primoque namque de his ad ortum sermo prorumpit quae leuiores discrete ab humano genere distant, daturus operam de singulis quae terra fouet mortalium nutrix, aut quondam fouisse fertur, quia nunc humano genere multiplicato et terrarium orbe replete, sub astra minus producuntur monstra, quae ab ipsis per plurimos terrae angulos eradicata funditus et subuersa legimus et nunc reuulsa litoribus prona tormentur ad undas, quaesque turbin poli uertice sub arduo a totius gyri ambitu et omni loco terrarium ad hanc uastam gurgitis se uoraginem uergunt.”]
boundaries between subjects categorized in limited binary terms as either monstrous or human. While the account is unique in the *Liber* in describing a subject living within proper society and not at the outskirts of the known world, it also is unique in the ambiguities of translating who exactly is being described; this is a person or man of both or either sex, and yet deciding which particular translation is most appropriate has been a matter of contention for the few editors of the text. What is important to note, however, is that an individual whose sexed body and gendered performance is rendered ambiguous takes the initial position in the catalogue of the *Liber*. The text thus registers, first and foremost, a concern with how bodies are rendered either human or monstrous depending on the categories of sex and gender. The catalogue’s full entry for the person is as follows:

Indeed I bear witness at the beginning of the work that I have known a man [or person] of both [or either] sex, who, although they appeared more masculine than feminine from their face and chest and was thought male by those who did not know, nonetheless loved feminine occupations and deceived the ignorant among men in the manner of a whore; but this is said to have happened often among the human race. (Orchard 258-59)

What I want to emphasize here are not the difficulties of translating the phrase “hominem … de utriusque sexus,” which, as I have already noted, remains ambiguous. I do, however, want to take that ambiguity as a starting point for considering the associations made with such a configuration of sex and gender. The entry for the individual focuses both on the corporeal body

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17 This “hominem … de utriusque sexus” has been translated variously as: a “bisexual man” (Butturff 92), “a person of both sexes” (Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 259), “un uomo bisessuato” (Bologna 36), “un uomo di entrambi i sessi” (Porsia 156).

18 [1.1: “Me enim quondam hominem in primordio operis utriusque sexus cognouisse testor, qui tamen ipsa facie plus et pectore uirilis quam muliebris apparuit; et uir a nescientibus putabatur, sed muliebria opera dilexit, et ignorant uiorum more meretricis, decipiebat; sed hoc frequenter apud humanum genus contigisse fertur.”]
in its apparently masculine anatomy and also on the predilection for feminine occupations, suggesting that identity, as perceived, must take into account both sexual anatomy and gender performance; while this seems rather an obvious observation, it’s important to stress the apparently equivalent importance of both body and performance, as the author does not resolve the tensions raised by such ambiguities. As with many classical sources for discussing ambiguously sexed or gendered individuals, the text gestures toward a tendency to classify such people as masculine because of the ideas both that male was the default gender and that the body’s appearance could be the locus of gender and identity. Indeed, Augustine says that

[a]lthough androgyni, whom men also call hermaphrodites, are very rare, yet it is difficult to find periods when they do not occur. In them the marks of both sexes appear together in such a way that it is uncertain from which they should properly receive their name. However, our established manner of speaking has given them the gender of the better sex, calling them masculine. For no one ever called them in the feminine androgynaecae or hermaphroditae. (De Civitate Dei XVI.viii)\(^\textbf{19}\)

While the Liber monstrorum gives no indication that the author borrowed Augustine’s terminology in naming gender, the text does locate the individual’s monstrosity in the blurring of gendered distinctions; indeed, instead of performing the “gender of the better sex,” this person “loved feminine occupations,” thus resisting an impulse to keep the boundaries of humanity neatly contained within the categories of male and female. Regardless, then, of whether this “hominem … de utriusque sexus” is an intersex person or an ambiguously gendered man, it is the refusal to remain firmly within categorical expectations of either male or female genders that

\(^{19}\) [“Androgyni, quos etiam Hermaphroditos nuncupant, quamvis admodum rari sint, difficile est tamen ut temporibus desint, in quibus sic uterque sexus appareat; ut ex quo potius debeant accipere nomen incertum sit; a meliore tamen, hoc est a masculine, ut appellantur loquendi consuetudo praevaluit. Nam nemo umquam Androgynaecas aut Hermaphroditas nuncupavit.”]
constitutes monstrosity; in the case of the former, an intersex person would disrupt expectations for the potential of binarily-sexed bodies, while in the case of the latter, a man performing feminine tasks subverts expectations for proper use of the male body. While Augustine’s method of assigning gender to intersex people was not the only one, his terminology, as well as that of other classical philosophers, points to the elevated hierarchical status of male over female. In addition to this system of naming, Augustine’s writing differs from that of the author of the Liber in its language describing the atypical anatomy. By writing of the bodies of Androgyni that “in quibus sic uterque sexus appareat,” Augustine suggests clearly intersex bodies, marked by the appearance of both male and female traits. The author of the Liber uses the far more ambiguous “hominem … de utriusque sexus,” suggesting the possibility of the presence of either male or female traits in addition to the possibility of both sexed traits. This possibility for a both or either configuration of male and female traits is suggested, further, by the likelihood that “homo” denoted an individual, rather than explicitly a man, who was gendered male by default. These linguistic differences suggest that it is not just the potentially atypical sexual anatomy of the individual that leads to its inclusion amongst the monstrous.

However, the author does not necessarily ascribe to such a view; there are no gendered pronouns in the section, and the designation of the person as “masculine” or “thought male” is attributed to others. Indeed, the description of the person says that they are working as a meretrix, which includes a range of definitions such as courtesan, court mistress, or kept woman (DMLBS 1a), a prostitute or whore (DMLBS 2a), a harlot (Lewis and Short), and a woman of loose character (Harper’s), all explicitly female and feminine definitions. The only facts to which the author “bears witness” are having witnessed the daily life of such an ambiguous individual, and then, having seen this person indulge in feminine occupations and “deceive the
ignorant among men in the manner of a whore.” Peggy McCracken claims that, in medieval romances, “the transvestite figure disrupts the distribution of reproductive roles and frustrates the exchange of women in marriages that worked to create and ensure dynastic alliances” (3). What, then, of the historical figure, living centuries before the rise of the medieval romance, who doesn’t fit into normative categories of gender performance? What of the working-class individual whose life doesn’t figure prominently in the continuation of dynastic alliances? Both the individual from the Liber and McCracken’s fictive transvestite figure evoke anxieties about the disruption of normative sex and gender categories. While the specific details of those anxieties are, of course, dependent upon temporal and geographic location, upon literary or historical status, as well as numerous other factors, there is an overarching pattern of unease surrounding ambiguously sexed or gendered bodies, what Garber calls a category crisis. Indeed, the Liber monstrorum questions the boundaries of masculinity and femininity when its author is confronted by an individual whose non-normative body and gendered behavior doesn’t fit into accepted categories. Garber’s framework, when used to discuss gendered ambiguity, can help facilitate an understanding of this enduring correlation between charges of sexual transgression and gender irresolvable into binary terms. McCracken’s observation about the trepidation surrounding the “transvestite” figure in romance thus resembles the anxiety depicted by the author of the Liber monstrorum in the opening account, and yet given the subject’s actual existence, such anxieties have significantly different effects. In creating a nation, questions of succession and inheritance certainly would have figured as important, and yet what is at stake in the Liber are not, explicitly, dynastic alliances, but rather, the everyday lives of the individuals composing England. However, the corpus of a nation depends upon its inhabitants, upon the subjectivities of its members. The focus of romance on royalty and dynastic alliances develops
from a sense of what it means to belong to a particular ethnic or geographic group; in this way, the mundane lives of the working class as much as the royalty inform and define a nation’s borders.

The *Liber* moves forward from its initial account of this ambiguous person of both or either sex, discussing increasingly fantastical creatures and races all characterized by their distance, in terms of space or time, from the author’s current society. Naked men who wrap themselves in their enormous ears and giant hirsute women who gobble up raw fish might exist at the sensationalized borders of India and Africa, if at all, but they’re certainly not subjects for the respectable and discerning British imagination. Yet the bones and corpses of giants remain preserved in the British landscape, as I discuss more fully in Chapter One, and the ambiguously sexed and gendered person who opens the catalogue of the *Liber monstrorum* lingers, even if marginalized, within the literal bounds of local society. Rather than function as museum curios or symbols of monstrous origin, the preservation of these subjects within the foundation of Britain suggests how the construction of viable terms of humanity are dependent upon ambiguity and transgression. The discerning voice of the *Liber monstrorum* gains its authority because of the ability to bear witness; if the ambiguous subject at the opening of the text were to be soundly categorized as non-human, the dominance of visual witness over textual belief would become irrelevant. In other words, the man/human of both/either sex must linger at social peripheries, never fully cast out, as continual scrutiny of the body and its behaviors allows the witness to remain in an authoritative position. Rather than affording or denying full participation in humanity, preserving sexed and gendered ambiguity in society, even at its alleged edges, allows for the continual reification of visual witness. The dissonance produced by the continued existence of irresolvable sex and gender allows the discerning voice to continue promulgating
binary femininity and masculinity as the idealized norm. Indeed, this person’s daily existence includes deceiving the ignorant among men in the manner of a whore, suggesting that ideal citizens are properly male and female (and preferably not whores, although the problem noted in the passage is not the economics of sex but rather the blurring of the sexed and gendered categories upon which such economics depend) and not susceptible to being duped—quite like the rational authorial voice of the text! Yet the entry for this individual concedes that such practices are said to have happened frequently among the human race. Although it’s not clear whether the author is discussing the frequency of prostitution or of the transgression of gendered categories, either possibility concedes that such alleged aberrance is not aberrant at all, projected perhaps as shameful, but an integral part of human desire—desire for the permission to transgress and indulge, to behave badly, or simply to construct a self not confined to existing terms of containment.

Overall, the following chapters serve as glimpses into the variety of ways that gender has been fantasized and represented on the manuscript page during the High and Late Middle Ages in Europe. While these representations might have kernels of truth, at times they verge on the perversely transfigured symbol that seems to prefigure the stereotypes undergirding contemporary culture’s transphobia and gender anxieties. To that end, I follow Weismantel’s charge that we approach the archive with rage. However, in considering the variety of effects writing transgender-like lives can have across genres, there are also moments that allow me, with Sedgwick, to read reparatively, for the moments where it is possible to parse out a sense of lived embodied experience from the ways that subject has been represented; I consider the overlaps and distinctions between human and symbol, between truth and stereotype, between life and
fantasy. In doing so, I aim to emphasize the possibilities for a broad range of expressions of gendered subjectivity as integral to human identity.

Chapter Outlines

I. Monsters in Our Closets: Gendered Desire in National Creation Myths – I start by discussing how national self-definitions in the medieval West construct both ideas of normativity and the measurements by which some people were to become “monstrous.” England is but one example of a country whose national creation myths imagine monsters in its lineage. What implications might there be for drawing the boundaries of the normatively gendered polis and subject when the very myths upon which a culture is fantasized to have been created are monstrous? In working through this question, this chapter considers texts that discuss legends of England’s first inhabitants, in particular Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century Historia regum Britanniae; Wace’s twelfth-century Brut; and the fourteenth-century prequels, including the Anglo-Norman Des grantz geanz and the Latin De origine gigantum. In these legends, monstrosity is configured as something to be desired, to be matched against and wrestled with before it becomes part of the land of the nation itself, a nation ostensibly composed of properly masculine citizens. In producing and then suppressing desire, in remaining continually engaged with the monstrous and the forbidden, nations expose how very much they need monsters; they might try to sweep them under the rug, but they still get to keep them in their bedrooms.

II. The Specter of the Subject: Forging Body Limits in Medieval Romance – After having considered fantastical constructions of the nation, I move to consider romance fictions. Similarly to national creation myths, romance fictions test the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable for the

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20 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles takes up this issue of desire for national unity at the expense of a religious or cultural scapegoat.
subjects of a nation. The romance genre is particularly useful for considering the implications of desirable ambiguity; the genre’s play with ambiguously human figures provokes readers to imagine how far from the norm a human can veer, how hard the fabric of proper society can be pulled, before recognizable society dissipates; and yet the romance genre provides the assurance that aberrance will always somehow be assimilated. For example, the late fourteenth century Sir Gowther and the early fourteenth century Richard Coer de Lyon reconfigure violence and carnality into acts of properly human, and specifically English, militarism against the marginally Other Saracens. The plot of the thirteenth century Le Roman de Silence considers the issues of gender transgression more explicitly, featuring a protagonist whose gender becomes a site of fierce debate between Nature and Nurture. In considering these romance fictions, I am interested in the construction of desire for variously ambiguous characters and what implications that desire has for the different categories simultaneously constructed and undermined: gendered body, human body, national body.

III. In God’s Name: Transgressing Gender in Hagiography – After having considered the implications of the romance genre’s presentation of desirable ambiguity, I turn to a consideration of explicitly religious materials. While legends of the so-called cross-dressed saints share much in common with each other, the tales were constantly shifting to meet what Mary Ann Stouck calls changing ideals of sanctity. Indeed, the multiple versions of Saint Eugenia’s legend exemplify how the presentation of gender shifted with correlation to these changing ideals. With specific attention to the development of the tale in its earliest forms to its thirteenth-century instantiation in the Legenda aurea, this chapter focuses on the saint’s self-presentation and on the interactions between the saint and other characters. These variations suggest the ways the legendary presents multiple possibilities for presentations and perceptions of embodiment and gender performance that transcend the strictly spiritual or metaphorical. Fantasized as spiritual ideal and didactic symbol, Eugenia, through her
interactions with other characters, points to the possibilities for the lived experiences of people whose performed genders and identities would not have been easily resolvable or nameable with binarily gendered linguistic descriptors.

IV. Beyond the Body of Chaucer’s Pardoner – Considering some of the medieval medical theory used to discuss “what’s wrong with the Pardoner,” I examine how various medieval people might have conceptualized possibilities for human bodies and gendered variance. There has been a tradition of criticism focused on the Pardoner and the physiological conditions that might have informed Chaucer’s description of him as “a geldying or a mare,” generally glossed as a eunuch or a homosexual, thus pointing to a longstanding desire to name that which consistently resists naming, to establish the objectivity of what is inherently subjective. I consider instead how the Pardoner presents himself, how the other pilgrims view the Pardoner, and how the self-conscious narrator of the Canterbury Tales describes the Pardoner. The overlaps and dissonances between various representations of the Pardoner suggest that beyond being a symbol of alterity or moral corruption because of his allegedly queer body and his duplicitous sermonizing, the Pardoner becomes a symbol of desire; attempting to seduce his fellow pilgrims to buy his false relics, he reflects their weaknesses and intimates a system of transgression and desire. Rather than diagnose the Pardoner based on descriptions of his body, I read the Pardoner for the transgressive potential symbolized by his own self-presentation.

V. “Speak a Better Truth”: Articulating Gender in the Medieval Courts – Finally, I return to the court cases of John/Eleanor Rykener and Rolandinus/a Ronchaia. In John Britby’s testimony against Rykener, Britby insists that Rykener was unambiguously female, likely to avoid being charged himself with sodomy. Yet, Rykener insists on their own ambiguity and ambivalences in gendered performance, claiming to have had sex as a man with many married women and nuns and as a
woman with many priests. Ronchaia, when asked to confess her crimes, relates her gradual development of a female gender identity and feminine presentation. Yet, instead of being punished immediately for her transgressions, the court orders her to “speak a better truth” and thus obfuscate the evidence of her identity. Refusing to recant, Ronchaia is burned at the stake. Both cases suggest legal and moral concern with regulating the borders of gender, and yet both Rykener and Ronchaia refuse the terminology the courts desperately try to ascribe to them. Thus, with a close consideration of these historical court cases, this final chapter continues to trouble conceptions about what gender should or could be.

VI. Coda – What’s represented as being particularly worrisome in these texts is the lack of visible distinction between those deemed monstrous and those allowed to be human. Indeed, Rolandina is said to look just like any other woman, and her indictment suggests the dangerous nature of how she can be just as good a woman as those assigned female at birth. Normative humans, specifically religious men and government representatives writing with sanctioned authority, can remain in control of the narrative if we accept their accusations of criminality – they shape the contours of what is normative, what is “strange,” what is explainable. Their narrative doesn’t have to deal with the unruly subjectivity of someone like Rolandina who refuses to explain herself on someone else’s terms.

I end with the suggestion that we resist the authority on which those texts rest and, like Rolandina, “speak a better truth” than the one proposed. In considering variously gendered performances and identities both within and across genres, this dissertation focuses on the silences in the medieval texts that suggest not only the existence of trans-gender lives, but also the continual necessity of such lives in constructing understandings of “the human.” In maintaining such a focus, we can continue to question the authority that sanctions whose genders get to be legible, whose
identities qualify them as human, whose appearances allow them to survive on a daily basis. In working to maintain more inclusive understandings of how people have understood and navigated gender in the past, we can expand our own awareness of the continually burgeoning possibilities for gender and social justice now.
Chapter One – Monsters in Our Closets: Gendered Desire in National Creation Myths

Beginnings: The Brut Cycle

As variations on a similar tale of origins, the versions of the Brut Cycle by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon, in narrating Britain’s legendary formation, engage with ethnic diversity, physical and figurative monstrosity, and all the heroic endeavors that raised Britain from a vegetative stomping ground for giants to the dominant nation it would, by the twelfth century, imagine itself to be. As examples of narratives engaging with questions of gendered behavior in constructing an image of the British nation, all invite similar questions: Where do we draw our beginnings? What sort of categories are deployed in sketching out those behaviors and ideas that comprise a country’s subjectivity? Who are our enemies and how do we decide on markers of difference? As this chapter discusses, these stories work through these questions by imagining the beginning of the British nation as a series of continual battles for dominance. In narrating a country’s martial lineage, it is important to present what elements of aggression and ambiguity are not only acceptable, but necessary and admirable, in one’s own country. The central concern of interiority versus exteriority in these narratives often is considered alongside questions of miscegenation: intermarriage between tribes, the offspring of humans and supernatural beings, and even in more abstract terms of maintaining a diverse population within the homogeneous image of “nation.” The navigation of the boundaries of sexual taboos inherently projects the limits of identities based on the performances of gender and sexuality, thus intimating the importance of those performances in the construction of idealized individual and collective identity.
Aggression and dominance are, of course, key for a foundation myth such as Britain’s; in the wake of colonization by the Normans, stories about Britain’s own history as a colonizer could function to assert the essential nature of the country’s power. Critics such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lesley Johnson, as I will discuss more fully, have established the importance of gender in these myths. Indeed, a myth about a country’s beginnings seems a key place to fantasize about its founders’ gendered subjectivity in relation to the lineage that will ensue. A heterosexual binary functions as a means of reproduction in the myths, but also introduces the idea of difference by fantasizing about the categories of masculinity and femininity. A key tension is how the idea of gendered difference is both foundational to myths but also a source of anxiety; if procreation is seen to depend on a heterosexual binary, then the stories must also represent what types of gender performance are acceptable or even ideal and which are transgressive or somehow pernicious for a developing society. These questions of the ambiguous borders between acceptable and unacceptable, between ideal and pernicious, are where I begin my work on the myths. Building on criticism of the tales that focuses on gender’s function in the myths, I consider what can be understood about their deployment of transgressive gender from a trans studies perspective. The giants of the medieval myths and Albion’s human inhabitants were not, of course, transgender. However, a trans studies-oriented perspective can show how gender’s borders may have been policed and constructed to create the image of an ideal subject. Indeed, while depicting an ideal subject, origin myths also introduce the idea of difference, producing a juxtaposition between the image of the ideal and the tension of fundamental difference.

While it is, of course, fairly common for medieval narratives, and histories in particular, to draw extensively upon source materials, installations of the Brut cycle, reimagined in various
textual incarnations, have their own particular interests in addition to the simple narration of British origin mythology. Wace, for example, likely wrote his Anglo-Norman version by 1155 for a Norman audience interested in the origins and mythology of the newly formed Anglo-Norman territory. Such a goal for a newly dominant audience might emphasize the malleability of the territory, its continued impulse toward unity and resilience precisely because of its diverse background. The Normans, after all, would benefit from imagining a now-unified nation as being forged from many diverse populations; what better way to imagine Britain’s teleological trajectory toward Norman colonialism? Even King Arthur, of ambiguous historical provenance but decidedly a British king, becomes cast in a Norman light; Gwyn Jones comments that “clearly Wace’s Arthur is more courtly and less farouche than Geoffrey’s, who in turn is more chivalric than the rude, savage, primitive and protective folk-hero Arthur of the earliest Welsh sources. All of this is exactly what we should expect of a French poet in the second half of the twelfth century” (*Arthurian Chronicles* viii). Such differences between the stories in each of their retellings suggest that it is necessary to question the nuances of what informs origin, if origins are continually written and rewritten to suit different audiences. The increasingly courtly Arthur fits into developing French models of what ideal subjectivity should signify; while still unmistakably a valiant warrior, this particular Arthur becomes far more refined, a warrior and a diplomatic courtly ruler. His masculinity has been channeled from the original savagery and primitiveness that might be desirable for the context of forceful imperialism to the newer refined courtliness befitting the image of an Anglo-Norman court.

Layamon’s version, instead, is decidedly English, written in the vernacular and arranged into either 16,000 alliterative lines or 32,000 short and irregular lines (*Arthurian Chronicles* x). Robert Ackerman contends that the poem could have been composed as early as 1190 in the
Southwest Midlands and that its use of archaic Old English style and terminology might be self-conscious, representing a deliberate link to British roots in the face of Norman colonial occupation (68-71). Such a style would allow for fantasies about a grandiose past, a history in which the British themselves were the colonizers and not the colonized. Depicting those subjects also relies on depicting how they navigate the presentation and performance of gender, suggesting models of ideal masculinity or femininity. While there are temporal and geographic variations on gendered categories, those very categories are the terms deployed to construct various incarnations of subjectivity. The stories are written partially to suit the desires of different ruling classes and their audiences, and thus those stories project variously nuanced ideas of what normative gender looks like for each social group.

While these interests of course necessitate differing models of subjectivity and behavior, all project those models of normativity through their deployment of ambiguity and transgression. The fantasies of hypertrophically gendered bodies, both human and giant, call into question boundaries and borders as they are blurred or surpassed. The transgressions of the cycle work in different ways, some via ambiguity and some via hyperinflation, and yet the assurance that those aberrances will be returned to eventual normalcy lingers in the background; after all, ideal subjectivity must be seen to reign dominant over temporarily wayward transgressions. I question, then, the extent to which these visions of idealism correlate with a fiction of dominance, a continual self-reassurance that the monsters really are defeated, that they really are gone once and for all—and the extent to which this vision resurrects its own monsters to provide that constant assurance that it remains in control. Cohen argues that “to abject the giant and everything his body encodes from cultural meaning is to ensure that the monster will haunt the periphery that abjection constructs, because a signification based upon exclusion depends upon
the continued presence (if only a presence in death) of the thing it exiles” (*Of Giants* 21). Further, this dependency on a continual presence of the exiled giant both cultivates and sustains a certain desirability of the giant’s gendered body; imaginative resurrections of the eradicated giant fantasize about its corporeality, as if to render it all the more embodied in the “continued present.”

As Cohen notes, giants could be gendered as either masculine or feminine in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic lore; what was more important was how “they gained an explanatory function as creators of landscape, ancient ruins, and mysterious architecture (*Of Giants* 6). Yet, in Geoffrey’s tradition of historical writing, the giants are gendered decidedly male. Cohen argues that Geoffrey doubtlessly is following the masculine gendering of biblical giants, but further that “the sexual poetics of nation building in the twelfth century also demanded narratives about founding fathers and masculine struggle, since the English crowd had so often pitted fathers, sons, and brothers against each other in a struggle for monarchical legitimacy” (*Of Giants* 52). Thus, Geoffrey’s tradition of masculine—and indeed, hyperaggressively masculine—giants emphasizes the correlation between the construction of a gendered body and the construction of ideal national subjectivity. The masculinity of the giants becomes pitted against the masculinity of the invading troops, and the winning side’s victory thus depends on a better performance and embodiment of idealized masculinity through battle prowess.

Geoffrey’s, Wace’s, and Layamon’s versions of the Brut Cycle all present an overtly teleological progression of history, culminating in the coming and development of Arthur, that “once and future king,” a blend of history, mythology, and fantasy. While this chapter considers various treatments of Arthur to a certain extent, I want to shift focus instead to the ways that the coming of Arthur is foreshadowed through depictions of the gendered performances of the
subjects who predate him. As I have briefly outlined above, Wace’s Arthur caters to an Anglo-Norman colonialist audience while Layamon’s Arthur fits more comfortably with an Anglo-Saxon understanding of heroism; what’s important is how the figuration of lineage reveals the implicit biases in the character’s virtues and ideals. Those trajectories that focus ostensibly on Arthur must consider, first, questions of the stability of the nation itself. Before Arthur ever can be imagined as a hero, that land must form a collective subjectivity out of which the hero can be born. The myths, then, retroactively construct images of ideal subjectivity and British unity. I concentrate mainly on Geoffrey’s *Historia regum britanniae*, as the first installment in the retellings of Britain’s origins, but consider, too, the prequels to the *Historia* and Wace’s and Layamon’s enduring interests in retelling the story and constructing different versions of ideally gendered subjectivity. In doing so, I show how gender is deployed as a means of arbitrating normativity against monstrosity, and of constructing the political and human body of English subjectivity.

Yet as these tales depict ambiguous and transgressive genders becoming “straightened out” and redeployed as normative ideals, the persistence of monstrosity and aberrance suggests that socially dominant groups cannot maintain total domination. Bruce Lincoln contends that “elites hold no monopoly on the exercise of force, and however much they attempt to define whatever lies outside their control as illegitimate, nondominant groups of all sorts always maintain some measure of force – if only that of their own bodies” (3-4). This claim calls to attention the potency of embodiment, the importance of materializing corporeality in the face of erasure. As I discuss in the next section, the original gigantic population of Britain and their progenitors are marked both with literal and with figurative monstrosity, wrestled into submission to be eradicated from the land’s surface to make way for the next dominant group.
Yet with both the *Liber monstrorum* and Geoffrey’s *Historia regum britanniae*, the alleged excision, the rendering of the monstrous as debased, points to the tenuous nature of such a veneer. As Lincoln observes about the role of embodiment in resisting erasure, the bodies of those subjects deemed unfit or ill-aligned with proper human governance play just as big a part in shaping that governance as do those who purport to shape the master narrative.

*The Origins of Giants: Gogmagog and Corineus*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), gives an account not only of the history of the kings of Britain, as the title suggests, but also of the pre-history of Britain as Albion, hinting at the monstrous lineage of its original inhabitants. That monstrous lineage is evoked only to be quite literally wrestled into submission and eradicated from the landscape. Before Geoffrey even writes of Brutus and his men meeting the giants said to be inhabiting Albion, Brutus himself is given a monstrous lineage of sorts: before his birth, soothsayers predict that his mother “would give birth to a boy, who would cause the death of both his father and his mother; and that after he had wandered in exile through many lands this boy would eventually rise to the highest honour” (I.iii).21 This act of parricide, while accidental, foreshadows the reconfiguration of monstrosity into something desirable in the name of empire-building; after having been exiled for accidentally killing his father, Brutus goes as an exile to Greece, setting off a chain of actions that enables him eventually to become the founder of Britain (at least, the founder according to Geoffrey’s account).

After having left Greece, Brutus and his men sail to find new shores, eventually landing on the island which will become Britain. Geoffrey writes:

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21 *Historia Regum Britanniae*, hereafter referred to as *HRB*: [“Certitudine erdo rei comperta dixerunt magi ipsam grauidam esse puero qui patrem & matrem interficeret. Pluribus quoque terries in exilium peragratis ad summum tandem culmen honoris perueniret”] (I.iii).
At this time the island of Britain was called Albion. It was uninhabited except for a few giants. It was, however, most attractive, because of the delightful situation of its various regions, its forests and the great number of its rivers, which teemed with fish; and it filled Brutus and his comrades with a great desire to live there. When they had explored the different districts, they drove the giants whom they had discovered into the caves in the mountains. With the approval of their leader they divided the land among themselves. (I.xvi)\(^{22}\)

As with the *Liber monstrorum*, the monsters populating the known world come to be driven away by the superior human race into the recesses of the landscape and away from common sight, deep into the mountains’ caves. Brutus and his men barely register the presence of the giants and deem the land uninhabited, seemingly effortlessly driving the giants under the ground that they will divide amongst themselves so that they can populate and govern the “most attractive” island for themselves. From the very moments that humans arrive on Britain, they display the desire to exert neat categories where previously there were none; the giants having been eradicated, Brutus and his men can draw the lines of governance over their new island.

And yet, this simplistic domination of Britain does not guarantee as neatly ordered a future as the initial occupation might suggest; barely any time passes after Geoffrey notes that Brutus and his men had conquered the giants before those giants are resurrected. Geoffrey writes of one particularly nasty giant, Gogmagog,\(^{23}\) with whom Corineus, Brutus’s second-in-command, loves wrestling more than anything else:

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\(^{22}\) *HRB*: [“Erat tunc nomen insulae albion quae a nemine exceptis paucis hominibus gigantibus inhabitabatur. Ameno tamen situ locorum & copia piscosorum fluminum nemoribusque preelecta affectum habitandi bruto sociisque gigantes ad cauernas montium fugant. Patram donante duce sortiuntur”] (I.xvi).

\(^{23}\) As Cohen notes, the name “Gogmagog,” alternately spelled Goemagog, Goemagot, or Gogmagoc, is “lifted either from the Hebrew Bible, where it has no connection to giants, indicating a leader and his people; or, more likely, from the Book of Revelation, where Gog and Magog are nations led by the devil to war against the kingdom of God” (*Of Giants* 35).
Corineus experienced great pleasure from wrestling with the giants, of whom there were far more there than in any of the districts which had been distributed among his comrades. Among the others there was a particularly repulsive one, called Gogmagog, who was twelve feet tall. He was so strong that, once he had given it a shake, he could tear up an oak-tree as though it were a hazel wand. (I. xvi)24

Corineus’s lust for giant-wrestling is presented as parallel to Gogmagog’s unmitigated lust for brute aggression; the conflation of the oak tree and the hazel wand emphasize the giant’s unusual and even unnatural strength, and yet it is a strength that Corineus undoubtedly will match, transforming monstrous aggression into military superiority. Also implicit in the History’s description of Gogmagog is the reminder that the giants resist human efforts to keep them safely subdued in caverns underneath Britain’s mountains. Yet beyond resistance on the part of the giants, the passage presents also a human tendency to desire the very monstrosity supposedly eradicated; not only does Corineus enjoy wrestling with giants, matching his brute aggression with the monstrous strength of the giants, nothing gives him greater pleasure. Indeed, when the Britons finally do slay all of the remaining giants, attempting to eradicate the monstrous lineage of their new island once and for all, Brutus commands that Gogmagog be left alive as “he wanted to see a wrestling-match between this giant and Corineus, who enjoyed beyond all reason matching himself against such monsters” (I.xvi).25 Indeed, Corineus himself is remembered at times as a giant!26 The pleasure, then, is not the simple moment of domination or the murder of...

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25 HRB: [“Hunc brutus uiuum reseruari preceperat uolens uidere luctationem ipsius & corinei qui cum talibus congredi ultra modum estuabat”] (I.xvi).
26 The 1558 coronation of Queen Elizabeth I featured two effigies of giants to memorialize this battle; whereas the twinned giants are usually considered Gog and Magog, and indeed, the Lord Mayor’s Show continues this gigantic
the monster, but the process of desiring a match with the monster, of maintaining the bonds that resurrect the abject body to keep making it abject.

Neither Brutus nor Corineus can resist their attraction to the entertainment and allure afforded by the giants. Geoffrey too indulges in the lurid details of their encounter, making the wrestling match into quite the erotic encounter. Corineus and Gogmagog align themselves for battle, “each hugging the other tight in the shackles of his arms, both making the very air quake with their breathless gasping” (I.xvi). Matched in the shackles of each other’s arms, the human and the giant are nearly indistinguishable. It is not until Gogmagog breaks Corineus’s ribs, thus suggesting that he is indeed gaining the upper hand, that Corineus’s anger at having fallen behind provides the very impulse that he needs to transfigure brute rage into brute strength. Having conflated pleasure and rage, raw monstrous strength and superior British militarism, Geoffrey depicts Corineus’s victory as he heaves Gogmagog up on his shoulders and runs to a nearby coast:

He clambered up to the top of a mighty cliff, shook himself free and hurled this deadly monster, whom he was carrying on his shoulders, far out into the sea. The giant fell on to a sharp reef of rocks, where he was dashed into a thousand fragments and stained the waters with his blood. The place took its name from the effigy tradition with Gog and Magog, the 1588 coronation featured two twinned giants labeled “Gogmagot the Albion” and “Corineus the Britain” (Public Sculpture of the City of London, Philip Ward-Jackson). Cohen notes a slightly earlier instantiation of these giants in 1554 as they welcomed Philip and Mary into London. He also speculates a perhaps still earlier date for their preservation in statues, noting that Henry V returned to London in 1415 from successful military efforts in France and was greeted by two giants erected on the London Bridge. See Of Giants, chapter two.

27 HRB: [“Inito deinde certamine instat corineus instat gigas & alter alterum uinculis brachiorum adnectens crebris afflatibus aera uexant”] (I.xvi).
fact that the giant was hurled down there and it is called Gogmagog’s Leap to this day. (I.xvi)\(^{28}\)

Gogmagog’s defeat thus marks the end of the inhabitation of Britain by giants, although his name lives on in the topography of the land; the cliff from which he was thrown, Geoffrey tells his readers, remains to this day known as “Goemagog’s Leap.” And yet Corineus, while reigning victorious in his battle with the giant and seemingly solidifying human domination of Britain, does not quell the obsession with or the desire for monsters in all their hyperaggressive masculinity; indeed, the monster represents superhuman strength, the possibility for gigantic growth as the body of the giant is subsumed into the body of the country.

As with the Praefatio and opening passages of the \textit{Liber monstrorum}, these legends of Britain’s beginnings suggest the ways that social and sexual order come to be constructed in the burgeoning nation, and the ways that legible gender informs that order. Gogmagog and Corineus match each other, man for man; Gogmagog has all the unbridled aggression that makes for spectacular brute strength while Corineus becomes the prototypical British warrior who matches and controls monstrous aggression with human superiority. Yet the legend of the giants lives on in popular imagination, resurrected continually in various retellings. Gogmagog himself remains embedded in the landscape, memorialized in name through Gogmagog’s Leap. Indeed, the entire battle between Corineus and Gogmagog has been revivified long after the \textit{Historia}’s original twelfth-century circulation, reenacted in effigy during the Lord Mayor’s Show to the current

\(^{28}\) \textit{HRB}: [“Vnde corineus compulsus in iram reuocauit uires suas & inposuit illum humeris suis & quantum uelocitas pro pondere sinebat ad proxima littoral cucurrit. Deinde sumitatem excelse rupis nactus excussit se & predictum letabile monstrum quod super humeros suos ferebat infra mare proiecit. At ille per abruta saxorum cadens in mille frusta proiectus dilaceratus est & fluctus sanguine maclauit. Locus autem ille nomen ex precipitatione gigantis adeptus saltus goemagog usque in presentem diem uocatur; diuiso tandem regno affectuit brutus ciuitatem edifice”] (L.xvi).
day. What better way to excite passion and exercise proper maintenance than to kill the giants over and over again? How better to reiterate normativity than to scrutinize those who exhibit marginal difference? Gogmagog, like the Liber monstrorum’s “hominem … de utriusque sexus,” becomes the sacrifice for the construction of proper English subjectivity, all the while maintaining his own inclusion as a disruptive element of that proper subjectivity.

Imagining monsters in the very lineage of one’s nation suggests the creative potential inherent in such hints of transgression; Gogmagog, as monster, becomes equated with unbridled aggression and brute strength, while Corineus, as human and, more specifically, as Briton, matches that aggression, arm-for-arm, and transforms blind rage into military superiority. Beyond this impulse to create a bigger and stronger enemy so that the victor comes across as ever the more impressive, the wrestling match at the genesis of Britain’s human history also fantasizes about how those Trojan exiles, linking Britain to ancient martial superiority, became the foundations of Britain and the progenitors of normatively gendered subjectivities. The Britons might have been very concerned with eradicating the giants and claiming Britain as a land all their own, but without those giants, they’d have very little on which to stake their own superiority. Indeed, the continual evocation of those giants allow the monsters to linger perpetually not only in Britain’s history but also in the present, thus maintaining them as the source of Britain’s mythological dominance and potency.

Bids for Power in the Historia’s Prequels

29 In 1215, London convinced the King of England to grant them the rights to elect their own Mayor, rather than having one elected by the Sovereign, as it had been done since 1189. The Mayor was required to travel to Westminster to take oaths at the beginning of office, and the procession gradually grew more festive, becoming an annual popular procession by the sixteenth century. See its website for further details on the procession: https://lordmayorsshow.london/
Given the masculinist perspectives of most western Christian origin and foundation myths and their use in these struggles for power, it’s not surprising that the Historia seems to be, in its opening episodes, very much concerned with male history. As Gayle Margherita argues, foundation myths as an overall genre “constitute a kind of communal fantasy of paternal origins, a fantasy of which the erasure or abjection of the maternal or feminine origin is an essential component” (129). Even the prequels, populated mainly by women, can be read as entirely masculinist and misogynist in their values and depictions of gender, as a brief outline of the prequels’ general story can show. The daughters of a king refuse to remain loyal to their husbands and plot to murder them in their sleep. Thanks to the confession of the youngest daughter, their murderous plot is uncovered and their father orders them set adrift on a rudderless ship, which winds up taking them to the land that they will name Albion. After sating their hunger and thirst to the point of excess, they experience sexual desire and so incubi, seeing a window of opportunity, rape them, resulting in the births of giants. The women subsequently mate with their offspring to populate Albion with an increasingly monstrous population. The tale of the prequels then concludes where Geoffrey’s Historia begins, with a monstrous island waiting for Brutus and his men to conquer the giants, rename the land, and set things straight for proper British governance.

The misogynist implications and assumptions of such a tale have, rightly, not gone unnoticed, as the prequels seem to set up a fairly straightforward point of origin for Geoffrey’s subsequent originary tale. Lesley Johnson posits that such a story depicting the Trojan Brutus defeating the offspring of the Greek women seems to reenact the enmity of the Trojan War, but this time using Western land as the battleground for the feminine Greeks to be defeated by the

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30 As I discuss below in this chapter, Fiona Tolhurst has written significantly on how the masculinist values of Geoffrey’s work largely can be attributed to scholarly bias; rather, she argues that Geoffrey’s work instead should be characterized as proto-feminist.
masculine Trojans (26). Indeed, Lisa M. Ruch too contends that Albion is set up as “a world upside down” to be straightened out by the men and prepared for occupation by the forthcoming properly British subjects (118). The tales certainly do imagine the chaotic and transgressive origins of the society that Brutus will domesticate and conquer. While Carley and Crick articulate the importance of the legend in terms of nationalist agendas, the gendered aspects of Geoffrey’s accounts and their matrilineal prequels are important vehicles for the formation of specifically gendered national identities. By imagining the sinful pride and murderous actions of the female protagonists that lead to their arrival on the empty isle of Albion, these tales characterize the formless wild as a feminine chaos needing the guidance and order that Geoffrey’s men will soon bring.

However, alongside the misogynist implications of the tales, these prequels implicitly locate women at the heart of what will someday become an empire, rather than merely as subjects to be eradicated while making way for superior masculinity. The story undeniably casts the women as sinful and manipulates their characters to represent warped categories of wife and mother. Indeed, the women seem to disappear from the narrative altogether once their giant-children are born and reproduce. Yet even within Genesis, the proliferation of humankind results both from God’s creation and from Original Sin, leading to the seemingly paradoxical idea of the felix culpa; sin is a necessary and, somehow, desirable function of life on earth. As Augustine writes, “For God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist” (viii).31 Without sin, there would be no need for salvation, and without the innately sinful nature of humans, there would be no constant pressure to strive to live according to better morals. Mark D. Jordan, Virginia Burrus, and Karmen MacKendrick write of Augustine’s Confessions that the

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poet constructs a mutually informative feedback loop of repudiating and then conceding to sin; in striving to resist temptation but giving in to sin, a person must constantly submit to God’s grace, thus strengthening their spiritual bond while pointing to the impossibility of perfection: “[W]e are never nearer to the gathering embrace of divinity than when we have wandered the farthest, never closer to letting go than when trying vainly to grasp it all. The secret is to submit to seduction—always to give oneself more” (31). Further, they write that “the disobedient will strives to create divinely because it wants to be as like God’s will as possible, imitating divine freedom by rebellion…. Disobedience inadvertently honors by imitation” (71). Such an approach to sin does not mean that the prequels aim to celebrate or praise the sinful actions of the women or to convince the audience to side with the murderous sisters over the subservient one. Yet it does point to the implicit importance of their actions often overlooked because of the violent nature of their crimes; their pride allows for the depiction of good being brought out of evil, eventual empire being brought out of transgression.

Well before the birth of the giants, the women’s actions in retaining their own nobility mark them as able contenders for the title of the founders of Albion, thus resisting any impulses to value them only for their perverse maternity. While the prequels characterize their prideful actions as sinful, they also reveal Britain’s dependency on their actions, as there would be no new empire without the actions of those willful enough to create it. The women’s sins, then, represent the possibility for their own salvation. Indeed, Johnson follows up on the above-cited point that the tale seems to present a reenactment of the Trojan War, arguing that the overt misogyny of the tale does not preclude it from having valuable insight into the productive labors that Albina and her sisters contribute to the foundation of Britain, beyond merely being the perverse mothers of, and then sexual partners to, their gigantic progeny. For instance, Johnson
argues that the prequels’ story, specifically “Des Grantz Geanz,” depicts the women as respecting and rehearsing the legal precedents for acquiring land and power (27). Fiona Tolhurst has provided significant evidence to challenge the characterization of even the Historia itself as being entirely masculinist, pointing out the importance of often-overlooked women and female figures in the story. She argues against characterizing the Historia as a completely masculinist tale, instead contending that the often-overlooked Vita Merlini portion of the tale contains two important points of origin for feminist Arthurian legends: the inclusion of a female prophet and the prominence of Morgan le Fay. She points out that it is largely the critical reception of the Historia, rather than the Historia itself, that ignores or suppresses its female characters and feminist potential (esp. 2-12). Similarly, the disgust of the prequels’ characters toward the women’s murderous actions encourages the audience to overlook the important work that ambition can serve in a creation tale.

It is within this framework of the ambivalently admirable nature of sinfulness that the legend of Albina and her sisters can be read for its depictions of a female beginning to an empire in addition to its more overt misogynist implications. In short, the pride of Albina and her sisters engenders their own willful actions, including the creation of Britain’s future inhabitants. Refusing to settle for unions they perceive as beneath them, they endure and then outlive their punishment in exile to become Britain’s very first inhabitants. The tale’s Augustinian mutually informative feedback loop of repudiating and conceding to sin is one way to account for its implicit reliance on sinfulness and transgression. Rather than locate these sins as a source for British shame, the Brut Chronicles and their matrilineal prequels fantasize about hypertrophically gendered bodies, both human and giant, as Albina and her monstrous offspring transgress the limits of otherwise socially acceptable genders. In other words, their hyperaggressive
performances of femininity and masculinity call into question the apparent confines of a
developing collective identity, implicitly allowing for a new British identity whose appetite for
growth need know no bounds.

As I briefly outlined earlier, the prequels begin with Albina and her sisters being exiled
for attempted mariticide from their native land, either Troy or Syria, after being forced to marry
men lower in status than they are. The sisters then find themselves set adrift on a rudderless
boat. Rocked by storms and nearly starved, the sisters’ arrival on the island that will someday be
known as Britain seems a miraculous turn of events; they are greeted with lush vegetation and
plenty of edible flora and fauna, and so they proceed to satiate their appetites. As the story goes,
they *more* than satiate their appetites and begin to glut themselves, leading to the rise of their
sexual appetites, which will be fulfilled by invisible demons. The rapes of these women,
portrayed as the response to their corporeal desires rather than acts of aggression and violence,
result in the births of the giants who Geoffrey posits as the original inhabitants of Britain. Their
tale ends with the note that Brutus and his men eventually will take over the land, eradicate the
giants, and rename it Britain.

Beyond functioning merely as the maternal catalysts for the tale however, the women’s
work in settling Albion depends on their pride in their own nobility as well as their own
innovation in the face of any threat to their autonomy. I would add, then, to Ruch’s earlier
contention that Albion is not merely upside down and waiting to be righted, but that the
“straightening out” of Britain and the development of normative subjectivity depends upon the

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32 As Carley and Crick point out, “Of the fourteen surviving copies of all or sections of the Long Version of the
Anglo-Norman Prose Brut ten contain copies of a ‘Syrian’ prose redaction of the Albina legend. According to this
account the sisters are daughters of Diodicius, King of Syria, and his wife Labana, and there is no sweet-tempered
younger daughter to play Hypermnestra’s part in betraying the plot. They succeed therefore in their nefarious
scheme of betraying their husbands. Brereton was undecided whether the Syrian version descended from *Des Grantz
Geanz* or whether both derived from a lost archetype. In either case, it is the Syrian version of the giants’ story
which subsequently became most widely known in English, because it was used, in English translation, as the
preface to the Middle English Prose Brut” (353-54).
transgressive femininity imagined to be at the core of Britain’s foundation. Johnson too immediately follows her observation about the opposition of Brutus and Albina with the argument that such a binary is far too simple to account for the complexities of the tale (26-27). As I argue above, the tale implicitly affords value to its women rather than complete denigration; there would be no monsters for Brutus and Corineus to wrestle into submission without the allegedly perverse transgressions of Albina and her sisters. In the tradition of the *felix culpa*, Albina’s transgressively gendered behavior, manifest in her allegedly excessive pride and ambition, provides the foundation for Britain’s development of normatively gendered categories. While Geoffrey’s tales locate the beginning of Britain in mankind’s conquest over the monsters, the prequels imagine its beginning in the original sin of female pride. However, rather than emphasize how these transgressions could have been imagined in order to construct a teleological progression of feminine weakness to masculine domination, I emphasize the necessity and appeal of keeping imagined transgressions and ambiguity at the foundation of a nation’s history. The lucky fall of Albina and her sisters leads to a nation founded on the principles of refusing to settle for perceived injustice and of surviving and thriving in the face of overwhelming odds.

It is specifically to the Latin “De Origine Gigantum” version of the story to which I now turn my attention. While the Anglo-Norman “Des Grantz Geanz” version slightly predates the Latin, the differences between the versions, beyond simple translation from Anglo-Norman to Latin, mean that each tale deserves scrutiny on its own terms. The Latin story claims to begin 3,970 years after the beginning of the world with Albion’s own story of genesis:

[T]here lived a certain king of Greece, more powerful than all of the kings of the earth together, who had thirty daughters by his wife the queen, all very beautiful
and tall just like their mother and father, yet whose names are not known except for the name of the eldest daughter who was called Albina. And all the daughters were brought up together and when they had reached maturity they were all married to famous kings. (7-13)

In connecting British history to Ancient Greece, the tale imagines royal roots for Britain, and not just any royal roots: this king in particular is the most powerful on the earth, and his family is described in terms of their impressive size, both in stature and in number. Similarly to how Geoffrey describes the remarkable strength of Gogmagog as simultaneously monstrous and marvelous, this tale emphasizes the royal and respectable lineage of the women who are to become subject to their own sinful tendencies and populate the British Isles with monstrous offspring. This introduction of the king and his family makes it clear that he is more powerful than all of the other kings of the world put together. Thus, the daughters’ marriage to other kings, however powerful those kings might be, means that they are marrying men of lesser degree. After “each and every one of them had become queens” (13-14), they band together and decide “under the influence of a certain feminine fate” (14-15) that they will kill their husbands rather than be subject to them. From the onset of the action, the women exert their right to maintaining their inherent nobility. Carley and Crick argue that this Latin version, compressed from the more rhetorically elaborate “Des Grantz Geanz,” does not provide motivation for the sisters, attributing their murderous intentions to an “undifferentiated ‘uice feminea operante

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33 All translations of “De Origine Gigantum” are from Ruth Evans, “Gigantic Origins.” “De Origine Gigantum,” which I hereafter will refer to as DOG: “Transcurcis a mundi constitucione tribus milibus nongentis et septuagintaannis fuit quidam rex Grecie cunctis regibus terre potencior qui habebat de coniuge sua regina triginta filias admodum speciosas et grandes sicut erat pater et mater earum, nominibus tamen incognitis excepto nomine filie senioris que dicebatur Albina. Et omnes filie simul erant nutrite omnesque nacta matura etate famosis regibus erant nuptes” (7-14).

34 DOG: “Cum ergo fuissent singule in reginas promote quadam uice feminea operante industria conuenerunt in unum” (14-16).
industry’” (358). However, despite not containing a direct translation of the “orgoil” of “Des Grantz Geanz,” the sisters’ motivations are clearly articulated:

And in discussion they devised a plan, namely that none of them would allow her husband to have sovereignty over her but, on the contrary, that she would subject him to her will. For it was because they were the daughters of a king who would not be subjected to any dominion, and that is why these women would not allow anyone to have dominion over them nor would they allow their noble degree to be under the sway of anyone. (15-21)\textsuperscript{35}

Without directly attributing their murderous intentions to pride, the story’s depiction of their motivations ascribes a certain rationality to their decision rather than blind greed, as they are working to maintain their inherent nobility. Of course, the story does not overtly congratulate the women on their attempted murders, but the shift from the Anglo-Norman version’s pride to the Latin version’s emphasized nobility seems to set the women up as characters with whom empire-builders could identify.

After the “wise king convicted them of the crime through a wise investigation,” the youngest daughter is exonerated of any wrongdoing while the rest of the daughters are set adrift on the sea in a rudderless boat.\textsuperscript{36} Clearly, this female resistance to suppression was viewed as monstrous in their native Greece, and yet, for a British nation struggling itself into existence, why wouldn’t the tale indulge in an underdog story? As Gogmagog must be depicted as an impressive adversary to emphasize the strength of Corineus and, by extension, British masculinity, so too do Albina and her sisters have to be depicted as regal and beautiful to call

\textsuperscript{35} DOG: [“Et tractantes consilium inierunt nulla maritum suum sibi sineret dominari sed sue subiceret uoluntati. Nam quia errant filie tanti regis qui nullius dominio subderetur nec ipse permitterent supra se aliquem dominari nobilitatemque suam alicuius dicioni subesse”] (16-21).

\textsuperscript{36} DOG: [“Exterritis autem illis et factum negantibus ac legittime purgacioni se offerentibus, rex prudens prudenti eas examinacione conuicit iuniore filia a malignitate huiusmodi excusata”] (45-48).
attention to the desirable potential of their supposedly sinful actions for nation-building. Throughout the opening of the story, Albina and her sisters are all presented in a rather uniform fashion, described in terms of their similar beauties and statures, and indeed, Albina is the only daughter whose name is said to be known. The women don’t gain any individuation beyond Albina’s leadership, until the youngest daughter confesses to her beloved husband the women’s murderous plans. After this confessional moment, the daughter, while nameless, is depicted as the most admirable of all. She reifies the normative model of femininity, a standard of compliance against which the transgressive actions of Albina and the other sisters can be measured: her husband “lifted up this woman who was overwhelmed with weeping, and embraced and kissed her, and he devoted himself to her completely in a much more affable fashion than was his wont, soothing her grief of mind and encouraging her heart to feel joy” (36-40). Through this image of an exemplary marriage, the youngest daughter now is recuperated into the dynastic family, as she, as a result of the confession, is absolved of any involvement in the crime. Thus, while the rest of the tale narrates the rudderless sea exile of Albina and the rest of the sisters, this moment of individuality accorded to the youngest sister depicts socially acceptable femininity. Before the remainder of the tale can focus on the journey of Albina and her sisters and their settlement on Albion, the youngest daughter swears her allegiance and service both to her husband and to her father, reifying the patriarchal structure that undergirds the deployment of gender categories in these tales.

Yet, of course, the story doesn’t end with the youngest daughter’s subservience, as Albina and her sisters go on to populate Albion with monstrous progeny while the obedient youngest sister remains safely behind at home. The story, then, switches its focus from the

37 DOG: [“Quam rex fletu perfusam leuauit, amplexatusque et osculatus est eam, ac totum se ei prebuit, solito graciorem dolorem animi eius deliniens et animans ad gaudium cor illius”] (36-39).
compliance of the youngest daughter to the boldness and innovation of the majority of the sisters. While the daughters are set in clear distinction to each other—the repentant youngest sister against the rest of the sinful ones—the tale affords more complexity to the sisters than casting them solely as sinners. While the youngest sister is exonerated, the focus on the peril in which Albina and her other sisters find themselves points to an overall concern with the recuperation and resolution not only of the obedient sister but also of the ever-transgressive murderous ones; besides, no one ever founded a new empire by staying safely at home. While the sisters are charged with licentiousness and transgression, the teleological impulse of the story toward the climax of monstrous birth seems to relish and endorse those actions, holding innovation and monstrosity together as seemingly opposite sides of the same coin. This monstrosity, on the one hand, seems a fitting continued punishment for their sins of pride and murderous intentions. Readers of the tale certainly must acknowledge the misogynist nature of its depiction of female pride and transgression. With this critique in mind, I also emphasize how, in reading through the deployment of misogyny in building a nation’s gender, the tale implicitly aligns monstrosity and stereotypes of femininity with the desirous potential for growth that must accompany any burgeoning state. Dismissing Albina and her sisters as mere pawns to be knocked over in the quest for the foundation of empire means overlooking their agency and labor in creating that very foundation. Gender has to be formed just as the nation does, and so what the corpus of tales about Britain’s giants ultimately emphasizes is not the sisters’ original sin, but their use of that sin for developing the eventual proper subjectivity of Britain’s first inhabitants.

Soundly condemned for their actions, the women are punished with both moral opprobrium and physical exile. The court is described as having no pity on them “on account of the barbarity of the unlawful act detected in them” (59-60) and indeed, it is noted that they are
“not to be grieved over with any compassion” (61-62). The poem, then, is absolute in its rejection of the women’s actions; while they are not sentenced to death, they are sentenced to a fate equivalent to death, left to their fate on a rudderless boat with no food or supplies so that fate can carry out the dirty work of putting the women to death. However, their fate is not to die adrift at sea; rather, fate carries them through rough storms while and the ship lands on the island that will become Britain. The women, then, go on to survive beyond their death sentences, fated to become the first inhabitants of the land which will become the English empire. After having landed upon the bountiful shores of the island and refreshed themselves on its fertile abundance, they “[despair] of ever recovering their former reputation,” yearning for their previous fame and emphasizing the continuation of their pride (86-88). Albina then attempts to console the rest of her sisters:

‘On account of our defects, we have lost our native land and reputation, and we have been made exiles, and the hope of their return to us is utterly gone. Therefore since we are now so fortunate and Fortune has given us this land, it is right that I should be first of all of you in it and that the lordship of it should be mine by right, because in disembarking first from the ship I took seisin of it.’ (88-93)

While Albina acknowledges the apparently sinful starting point of their journey to Albion, she quickly reclaims that acknowledgment for their own gain. She does not disavow her past or lead her sisters in acts of penance; instead, she seems to indicate that their alleged sin of pride was the

38 DOG: [“Quo facto non erat qui earum condoleret miserie ob compertam in eis immanitatem malicie. De dolosis dolorose sunt facte nec ulla tamen miseracione dolende”] (55-57).
39 DOG: [“…deserti et recuperacione prisci honoris…”] (80-81).
40 DOG: [“Ob nostra demerita patriam perdidimus et honorem et exules facte sumus nec spes nobis reuersionis est ultra. Cum ergo simus taliter fortunate et hanc terram dederit nobis fortuna iustum est ut prima sim ego omnium uestrum in ea et iuris mei sit principatus ipsius, quia prior ego in egressu nostro de naui seisinam eius accepi”’] (79-87).
very catalyst that led them to dominion over a new land: *therefore* [ergo] they are now so fortunate as to have their own land, and *it is right* [iustum est] that lordship be given to the woman bold enough to claim it. Indeed, Albina, confined to the bounds of the rudderless ship by the orders of their father, is the first to disembark the ship and, in that departure, to obliterate any remaining ties to the patriarchal bounds of her lineage. The founders of Britain need those giants in order to catalyze their dominant reputations, and so they also need Albina’s willingness to be the first woman to abandon ship for a new land.

While the first half of the tale might valorize the youngest daughter’s normative femininity in reifying the gendered structures that uphold the Greek dynasty, Albina’s speech suggests the powerful potential of transgressing gendered categories in contributing to the foundations and continued growth of a nation. As the women settle Albion, their innovative approaches to survival and cultivating the land allow them to establish themselves as self-sufficient inhabitants, as they craft snares and devices from twigs to capture wild animals and birds as well as develop methods to cook their captured prey into a nutritious feast.\(^{41}\)

However, this description of their ingenuity in establishing their settlement quickly gives way to the violent and grotesque ending which informs the overall tendency to read the tale as thoroughly misogynist. The women disappear almost altogether from their own narrative at the moment that their gigantic offspring are born, save to mate with their own sons to populate Albion with increasingly monstrous progeny. This erasure can be read as implying that the women, having given birth to the giants for Brutus and Corineus soon to defeat, are no longer important to the tale, their maternal work, however perverse, having been completed. Johnson

\(^{41}\) **DOG:** “[Iam vero quia cibus eis deerat nutritiuus nec habebant ingenia ad capiendas feras et aues excogitacione subtili fecerunt tendiculas uirgeas, quibus inuicem connodatis fers caperent et tenerent. Sed et ingeniola componebant ex urgis pro auibus capiendis, Captam igitur uenacionem excoriarunt et extracto igne de silice coxerunt in coreiis et aues as prunas torrebant. Et his epulate sunt splendide sed aqua potate”](89-86).
describes the paradoxical nature of the women’s erasure, noting that while the women’s commemoration of the island is eradicated by Brutus’s later eponymous naming of Britain, they remain very much alive in the popularity of the tale (31). Thus, despite the tale’s overt teleological push as a prequel toward the coming domination of Brutus and his men, it is important to consider the importance attached to the work and the values that Albina and her sisters invest into the foundation of Albion beyond merely a perverse maternity; the narrative certainly condemns the ensuing actions and appearances of Albina and her sisters, and yet it also holds in precarious balance the combination of admirable potential and transgressive monstrosity. The women are charged with sexual impropriety, as their overindulgence in roasted meats leads them to become “fat and coarsely [as] they began to be inflamed with sexual desire and felt an urge for the titillation of the flesh” (105-07). It would be almost too easy to dismiss these charges as the usual misogynist depiction of female desire; the line masks that the ensuing sexual encounters are not consensual, but violent acts of rape, as the narrative goes on to tell: “[D]emon incubi, seeing their advantage and having assumed the shape of men, raped the women, intermingling their seed with the women’s seed, and immediately vanished into thin air” (108-110). Yet rather than linger on the violence of the act, the tale quickly moves to the giants birthed as a result of the act, shifting narrative focus from the agency of Albina and her sisters to their perverse maternity. Indeed, after the women have birthed the giants and raised them to puberty, widespread incest between mothers and sons and between sisters and brothers leads to increasingly monstrous progeny, described as being “of huge stature, of vast size, and

42 DOG: [“Cumque talibus refocillate cibariis uires recuperarent amissas et nutribilium esu dapum grosse essent et crasse ceperunt calore accendi uenereo et titillacione carnis urgeri”] (96-99).
43 DOG: [“Quod demones incubi perpendentes assumptis hominum sibi formis cum mixtura feminei seminis oppresserunt easdem et euauerunt continuo”] (99-102).
stupendous strength” (114-115). While these characteristics certainly seem appropriate for describing giants, they also resonate with the values expected of the men who, according to Geoffrey’s Historia, soon will take control of the island. Large stature and impressive strength are, after all, important qualities for anyone looking to settle a new foundation.

As Johnson points out, the giants of “Des Grantz Geanz” are so violent and anarchic that Brutus and his men experience very little opposition to their conquest (37). In that version, it seems fitting that the men’s more refined military efforts, relying on brute strength as they may, easily conquer the chaotic group of giants. Similarly, the condemnatory tone of the tale toward the transgressions of its women make the violent actions of their progeny seem a fitting consequence. Yet the giants of “De Origine Gigantum” differ markedly from those brutish and uncivilized giants of “Des Grantz Geanz.” It is true that their appearances are described as “exceedingly horrifying since loathsome demons gave birth to loathsome giants, and also the mothers of the giants were of loathsome fatness” (115-118). Yet after having described the loathsome nature of their physical appearances and paralleling the bodies of the women and the giants, the narrator describes the complexity of the giants’ society, suggesting the dissonance between their loathsome physical appearance and the admirable skill of their architecture:

And they made for themselves subterranean cave-dwellings and surrounded them with great walls and ditches. And some of those walls can still be seen, others having been impaired and destroyed by the passage of time. They even loved the mountains for homes, believing themselves to be most safe by remaining in lofty places.

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44 DOG: [“Et erat generacio monstruosa scilicet inmoderate stature magnitudinis excessiue et fortitudinis obstupende”] (106-08).
45 DOG: [“Aspectus uero gigantum horribilis erat nimis quia et horridi demones orridos procrearunt gigantes et matres gigantum horride corpulencie extiterunt”] (108-10).
And the giants lived on peacefully in this land until the arrival on its shores of the Britons who came hither a long time before the advent of Christ.

(121-29)\(^{46}\)

This lengthy description of their lives before the coming of the Britons gives a significantly different picture of the giants than those described in “Des Grantz Geanz.” In this version, the giants are linked to the noble and mysterious tradition of the *enta geweorc*, the old works of giants, as evidenced by their architectural skills, while their peaceful nature is contrasted with the implied violence of the soon-to-arrive Britons. In this description of giant society, Albina and her sisters disappear from the narrative and are outlived by generations of their progeny. The women’s creative labor *not* relating to their maternity but to their innovation and settlement of Albion, though, must be given equal emphasis. If the giants were to be described as the vicious and anarchic monsters of the “Des Grantz Geanz,” then it might be more reasonable to suggest that the tales emphasize the women for, above all else, the consequences of their perverse maternity. Yet that emphasis seems a less obvious possibility given the description of peaceful giants who seek safe habitation in the mountaintops and build the subterranean caves and tunnels that give way to the legends of the old works of giants. The giants of “De Origine Gigantum” exhibit the same ingenuity as Albina and her sisters in settling into the land that becomes their home; any intimations of violence or horror are restricted to descriptions of their physical appearance.

Finally, then, the tale holds in precarious balance a simultaneous condemnation and celebration of the women who founded Albion. While it certainly would be a mistake to

\(^{46}\) DOG: [“Feceruntque sibi cauernas subterraneas et circumuallarunt eas magnis muris et fossis. De quibus muris aliqui stare uidentur ceteris tempestate concussis et diritis. Montanas eciam habitaciones amabant arbitrandes tutissimum sibi esse in eminentibus locis manere. Et perdurarunt gigantes pacifice in hac terra usque ad adventum britonum in eandem qui huc longe ante adventum Christi uenerunt”] (113-120).
overlook the misogynist assumptions that undergird the tale, it also would be an oversight to
dismiss the possibility of a more complicated treatment of the tale’s women based on those
ovely negative attributes. While the women’s decision to kill their husbands is roundly
condemned, their attachment to their inherent nobility is at the very least understandable, if not
outright admirable. While their actions are depicted as sinful because of their pride in refusing to
remain subject, that pride is necessary for anyone seeking to found an empire. Even the final
portion of the tale, marked as it is with a spiraling descent from the consequences of the women
merely feeling sexual desire to the increasingly monstrous progeny of their tangled incestuous
relationships, exhibits the possibility of a female legacy of innovation and social governance.
Although the Historia is a fuller historiographical account of Britain’s origins, intertwined
though it is with the romantic and the fantastic, its prequels suggest a popular desire to know
more than a teleological account leading up to Geoffrey’s present. This desire, then, suggests the
contradictions of the tale’s depictions of sin; the simultaneous violence and innovation of
women’s labor in resisting subjugation provides the possibility for narrative that imagines
admiration and agency for its women as the founders of an empire.

Continuations of Geoffrey and Renegotiating Social Ideals

The Historia regum britanniae inspired not only prequels, but also, in typical medieval
fashion, various retellings which emphasize different points and utilize different tones to present
a tale that best suits its intended audience. Jeff Rider, in comparing the presentation of Merlin in
Wace’s and Layamon’s retellings, writes that “Wace was quintessentially Norman, a
professional writer who enjoyed royal patronage. Layamon was a ‘thorough[ly] medieval
Saxon,’ a rustic priest who wrote to please himself, perhaps out of a sense of patriotism” (1).
Indeed, Wace’s Anglo-Norman version certainly celebrates the valorous history of the newly formed Anglo-Norman territory, as an almost-teleological progression toward the dominance of the Norman court. Layamon, instead, resists such valorization of Norman ideals and subtly deploys Merlin as an agent of resistance to the erasure of British ideals. Rider observes:

In Merlin’s increased independence from royal power; in this increased tension between the historical, political center and the visionary, fictional margin; in Layamon’s movement away from historical discourse toward fictional discourse, we can see not only more effective romancing but also a reflection of the difference between Wace’s and Layamon’s circumstances. On the one hand we have the Norman court at the heart of a Norman empire; on the other there is the Saxon parish priest at the empire’s edge. Just as Layamon’s linguistic archaizing was not an innocent yearning for the good old days but a political gesture whose modern equivalent would be something like an exhibition of traditional Palestinian crafts on the occupied West Bank, so in Merlin’s elusiveness and independence we find the representation of feelings of resistance, of defiance of what was Norman, royal, central, predetermined. (10)

While the focus of this chapter is not Merlin’s political image, he is important in considering how ambiguity is rendered as desirable in the construction of nations. By the moments in the narrative of Brut chronicles that Merlin becomes a significant figure, the character of Arthur has already set the standards for what constitutes masculinity; while not always idealized, Arthur’s ascent to power and to mythology emphasizes the desirability of his empire-building potential. While representations of Arthur in the broader corpus of his legend are, in turn, not always
wholly idealized, the Brut Cycle stories of his birth and ascent to power suggest the importance of his empire-building potential.

Indeed, giants, Merlin, and Arthur alike have been mythologized through continual retellings, and thus all share in this trait of desirable ambiguity, of transgression as simultaneous sin and empire-building potency. There is a certain valor to emphasizing the glory of the losing side, as such emphasis considers, nostalgically, the potential of what could have been, as well as the strength of the victor. The characterization of Arthur as the “once and future king” points to the power of his myth continually to inspire hope and rally the nation, around a mythologized history, to a powerful future. Yet beyond and before the symbolization of Arthur, the Brut Chronicles, in various details, grapple with the monstrous, the unknown, the ambiguously structured, and work toward presenting a rubric of normative subjectivity.

While Wace’s and Layamon’s versions of the Brut Chronicles open with accounts of Brutus and the giants, as does Geoffrey’s, it is important to note variations on how the different installations of the cycle present beginnings. Many modern editions and translations of Wace’s and Layamon’s accounts eliminate the first few books altogether. While I consider variations in the opening scenes, this impulse to “cut to the chase,” so to speak, is significant in and of itself. The modern editions’ excisions of Wace’s and Layamon’s opening books call attention to the importance of a different sort of beginning: not Brutus’s lineage and voyage, but the events leading directly to the birth of Arthur. At this point in the cycle, Constantine is murdered by a certain Pict while Vortigern makes his sly bid for power, welcoming the Saxon pagans Hengist and Horsa into the realm and marrying Hengist’s daughter, Rowena. Thus, the literal monstrous transgressions of the giants framing Geoffrey’s narrative are here eclipsed by human actions and figurative monstrosity. Wace’s and Layamon’s revisions engage, however, with similar moments
of humanity formed from monstrosity, if we view monstrosity in terms of aberrance from social normativity; despite the absence of literal monsters at this particular scene of genesis, both are permeated with episodes that suggest how normative categories of masculinity and femininity are forged from the ambiguously gendered.

Similarly to how Gogmagog’s body and legacy live on both in the landscape and in legends, functioning as a continual reminder that British domination depends on his existence, ambiguous origins linger in the subtexts of Wace’s and Layamon’s versions to continue to shore up those constructions of what it means to be a normatively gendered subject. Despite the different emphases and biases displayed in Geoffrey’s, Wace’s, and Layamon’s versions, all three engage with sexual transgressions and desirable monstrosity at the foundations of their texts, suggesting their enduring potential for building empire despite the unstable borders of ambiguity and monstrosity. While each text has its own nuances, each engages with the idea of desirable ambiguity, monstrosity, and transgression at the foundations of its society: the slaying of Constantine, the birth of Merlin, the birth of Arthur, and indeed, the birth of Britain itself.

In considering some of the ways that Wace and Layamon depart from Geoffrey in setting up these events, Brutus and his men find themselves on an island with the Temple of Diana on their way to finding Albion; unlike with Geoffrey, the authors of the revised versions describe Diana not just as a goddess, but a devil. Wace describes her as “Diana, by name, a prophetess. / She was a devil, who deceived / The people with her charms and spells” (637-40).47 Layamon says that “þe Deouel heo luuede. / Heo dude wnder craftes þe Scucke hire fulste. / Heo wes quen of alle wodes þe weoxen on eorðen / a þon heðene lawen me heold heo for hehne godd” (Caligula 575-79). Tolhurst points to Geoffrey’s inclusion of this section, a moment in which a

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benevolent goddess Diana grants Brutus and his men a vision of Albion and watches over them as they journey to the island, as a moment in which Geoffrey’s version ascribes agency to its female characters, pushing back against claims that the Historia affords its women no real or admirable power. Wace and Layamon, however, pervert Diana’s role as a goddess by aligning her with the devil and suggesting that she deceives men through witchcraft. In the revisions, then, Brutus and his men are not guided to the island of Albion by a divine maternal presence but by an infernal vision from a witch-goddess who works to deceive and mislead. However, despite introducing Diana in demonic and demoralized terms, Wace and Layamon follow Geoffrey in depicting Brutus praying for a vision and guidance, which subsequently lead him and his men safely to Albion. As with Albina and her sisters, Diana is presented as a transgressive and dangerous agent, yet one whose aberrant qualities ultimately are reconfigured as desirable traits for the ultimate teleology of Britain; unlike with Geoffrey’s account, agency lies with Brutus and his men, who receive a vision from a goddess depicted not as a guide but as a deceiver.

In this episode and elsewhere, both Wace’s Anglo-Norman and Layamon’s English rendition of the Historia regum britanniae question the idea of what can be assimilated into the corpus of normative British masculinity.48 While Hengist and Horsa, welcomed by the slain Constantine’s son Vortigern, are pagans, they are presented initially as good and loyal warriors, fighting the Picts alongside the Britons. This extended attention to the initial loyalty of the Saxons, while present in Geoffrey’s account, is greatly amplified in the accounts of Wace and Layamon. While Christianity has not yet become synonymous with Western medieval subjectivity, religious affiliation is registered as a concern, albeit a concern that takes a backseat to concerns with warrior militancy and loyalty to the realm. This ideal is important to stress at

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48 As Cohen notes, “[u]nlike their counterparts in Latin tradition, Germanic giants could also at times be female; biblical, classical, and later medieval giants were relentlessly gendered masculine” (Of Giants 6).
the beginning of a text dedicated not only to the history of the kings of Britain, but also more subtextually to the history of Britain as a nation tending towards military unity and dominance; the Normans, having exerted dominance over Britain for less than a century, would have appreciated a history that valorized military strength over ethnic similarity in constructing ideal subjectivity. Layamon’s version of the text, written in the English vernacular and concerned more with British history and ethnic pride rather than accommodating the new Anglo-Norman ruling class, opens with similar concerns to Wace; in discussing Hengist and Horsa, both texts consider ethnic assimilation in the name of military superiority.

But in Layamon’s version, before the tale of Hengist and Horsa, the Britons rush to help Constantine, a rush which includes women donning men’s clothing to join men on the battlefield and assist in the resistance. Rather than incorporate any loyal pagans into the British army, the women tear apart any heathens that they can find. Indeed, Layamon’s version is unique in including this episode absent altogether from both Geoffrey’s and Wace’s versions, pushing the boundaries of what gendered behavior can do for a country. Geoffrey and Wace both describe the destruction that Kings Wanis of the Huns and Melga of the Picts wreak on the Britons; after having murdered eleven thousand British virgins shipwrecked near them who refuse to have sex with them, they move their plunders to Britain itself. Layamon, too, includes this episode, but while Geoffrey and Wace finish their episodes with the plunder of Britain, Layamon depicts the British as, ultimately, victorious. What’s of particular interest is the gendered manner in which the British are victorious; while Wace and Geoffrey depict the women of this episode largely as passive victims, Layamon writes that, “Liðen toward Lundenne moni hundred þusend. / bi straten & bi walden al hit forð hælden. / & þa æhte wif-men wæpmonnes claðes duden heom on. / & heo forð wenden towward þere uerde” (Caligula 6403-06). Not only do the women dress in
men’s clothing, they outdo the men on the battlefield: “Þe mon þe iseȝen þat gomen hu forð
gengden þa quenen. / ȝeond wudes & ȝeond feldes ȝeond hulles & ȝeond heldes. / whær-swa heo
funden æine mon at-wunden. / þe weore mid Melga þan hæðene kinga. / þa quenen lude loȝen &
al hine to-droȝen. / & beden for þere seole þat hire neuere sæl nere. / Þus þa Bruttisce quenen
moni þusend aqualden. / & þus heo areden þæsne kinedom of Wanis & of Melgan” (Caligula
6420-27). The inclusion of women in the ranks of the British military points to the malleability
of gender in service of a military unity. Indeed, the Britons are saved by women who tear apart
the enemy, forging a unity by destroying elements of difference, so to speak; in addition to
excising the enemy, they themselves call into question the boundaries of difference as they cloak
themselves in male clothing and bond with their male military counterparts in service of the
nation. Indeed, Layamon’s version suggests that the women supersede the men in setting the
standards for military skill. Not only do they dress as men, they are the ones to liberate their
kingdom, and the men are the ones who stand to learn from them, as they “should have seen the
game” (“þe iseȝen þat gomen”) as the women dominate the enemy; they do not struggle or seem
to exercise brute strength as Corineus does against Gogmagog, but instead enjoy their game and
indulge in laughter. Layamon then recounts the same events as Wace for the coming of Hengist
and Horsa after Vortigern’s implicit involvement in the murder of Constantine; however,
opening with this small detail shows a concern with emphasizing British, or ethnic, superiority,
rather than military strength, or the potential of ethnic assimilation. Such differences are, of
course, important to acknowledge, as they contribute to varying contexts, and so what I want to
emphasize is how both opening accounts, different though they are in their biases and intended
audiences, root transgressive behaviors, for better or for worse, at the foundations of their
mythologies; those behaviors set the framework for how ideals can be established and then
shifted, how categories for gendered behavior can be set and then revised to exploit the full potential of border crossing. While Wace’s *Roman* emphasizes military strength as the watermark of British subjectivity—a military strength powerful enough to supersede ethnic and religious dissonance, so long as unity prevails—, Layamon’s *Brut* postulates British masculinity as the dominant trait of proper subjectivity. Both versions of the text, I argue, seize ambiguity and malleability as the locus of empire-building power. Unity can be forged from chaotic dissonance, while proper warrior masculinity can be forged from anyone, male or female, able to play the part.

In considering these moments in both Wace’s and Layamon’s accounts, it is evident that both, of course, have their differing biases and audiences and should be discussed with regards to those differences. However, when seen alongside each other, they are remarkably similar not simply as variants of the same story, but as presentations of gendered and sexual ideals rooted in transgressive and ambiguous behavior. Thus, Wace’s account of the arrival of Hengist and Horsa stresses their military superiority, presenting ideal warrior masculinity, as I discuss above. Hengist announces before Vortigern:

> Our folk are marvellously fruitful, and the tale of the children is beyond measure. Women and men are more in number than the sand, for the greater sorrow of those amongst us who are here. When our people are so many that the land may not sustain nor suffice them, then the princes who rule the realm assemble before them all the young men of the age of fifteen years and upwards, for such is our use and custom. From out of there they choose the most valiant and the most
strong, and, casting lots, send them forth from the country, so that they may travel
into divers lands, seeking fiefs and houses of their own.49

In emphasizing the strength of Hengist and Horsa as the main factor in their exile from their homeland, the text presents an image of the admirable foreigner; while Vortigern has already been implicated in the murder of Constantine and is presented as an untrustworthy figure, the strength of the pagan men becomes desirable for his battle against the Scots as he, presumably, seeks to preserve the dominance of the Britons. This desirability, ambiguous and ambivalent in its incorporation of pagan men into Christendom, quickly becomes the source of further threats to the Britons, as the normative and admirable warrior masculinity of the Saxons becomes displaced by Vortigern’s miscegenation and Saxon betrayal. As with the birth of the giants, the progeny of demons and exiled women, Vortigern’s union with the Saxish Rouwenne is depicted as an act of miscegenation, leading to the creation of a polity based on outlawed sexual behavior and ethnic amalgamation.

Thus, if these transgressive acts—transgressive both in terms of religious behavior and expectations for the sexed and gendered behavior of Briton people—are presented as criminal or violent or aberrant, they also come to make way for the creation of the crown jewel of the Brut Chronicles: the coming of Arthur and, along with his legend, the glory of Britain. Thus, the literal giants at the beginning of Geoffrey’s texts are absent from Wace’s and Layamon’s

49 Arthurian Chronicles: Wace & Layamon [“Bons reis, dist Henguist, gentil sire, / Ne sai si unches l’oïs dire, / Nostre terre est de gent naïve / Plus abundable e plenteïve / Que nule alter que vus sachiez / Ne dunt vus ja parler oiez. / Noz genz merveilles fructifiant / E li enfant trop multipliant; / Trop i ad femes e trop humes, / Ço nus puet peser ki ci sumes. / Quant nostre gent est tant creüe / Que la terre e nest trop vestue, / Li prince ki les terres sunt / Tuz les juenvles assembler sunt / Qui de quinze anz sunt u de plus, / Si cume custume est e us; / Tuit li meilher e li plus fort / Sunt mis fors del pais par sort / Si vunt par alters regiuns / Querre terres e mansiuns, / Pur la multitudine espartir / Que la terre ne puet suffir” (6739-60).] In Layamon’s version: “Beoð in ure londe selcuðe tiðende. / Vmbe fiftene ðer þat folc his isomned. / Al ure iledene folc & heore loten werpeð. / Vppen þan þe hit faleþ he scal uafen af londe. / Bilæuen sculen þæ fiue þæ sexte scal forð lîtæ. / Ut of þan leode to uncuðe londe. / Ne beo hena swa leof mon uorð he scal lïæn. / For þer is folc swiðe muchel mare þene heo walden. / Þa wif fareð mid childe swa þæ deor wilde. / Æueralche þer heo beøð child þære. / Þat beøð an us feole þat we færen scolden. / Ne mihte we bilæue for liue ne for daðe. / Ne for nauer nane þingæ for þan folc-kinge. / Pus we uerden þære & for þi beoð nu here” (6913-26).
accounts, and yet the accounts engage similarly with the idea of transgressive, and indeed monstrous, behavior functioning as necessities in foundational myths. Without the improper masculinities of Gogmagog (excessive in his aggression); Vortigern, Hengist, Horsa (too self-serving to be proper warriors for Britain); and even Layamon’s warrior women (differing from the aforementioned examples in their more laudable embodiment of the aggression and militancy that might be expected of any male warrior), the forthcoming heroisms and mythologies of Merlin, Arthur, and Britain in its own imagination would scarcely retain their currency as markers of normativity and idealism.

Following the pattern of transgressions as desirable for a foundation myth, the accounts go on to present the famous births of both Merlin and Arthur. While Wace and Layamon present accounts that differ in important ways, both agree on the births occurring as a result of sexual transgressions and violations of gendered categories. Merlin is born as a result of his mother having been visited by a demon, while Arthur is born as a result of King Uther, disguised via Merlin’s magic as the Earl of Cornwall (or Gorlois, in Layamon’s account), raping Igerne. In these accounts, the horrific violations of women are downplayed as trite occurrences. Wace describes the demon who rapes Merlin’s mother:

These demons are called incubi. Their home and region is in the air, but this warm world is their resort. It is not in their power to deal man great evil, and they can do little more mischief than to trick and to annoy. However they know well how to clothe themselves in human shape, for their nature lends itself marvellously to the deceit. Many a maid has been their sport, and in this guise has been deceived.50

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50 *LRB*: [“Incubi demones unt nun; / Par tut l’eir unt lur regiun, / E en la terre unt lur repaire. / Ne püent mie grant mal faire; / Ne püient mie mult noisir / Fors de gaber e d’escharnir. / Bien prenent humaine figure / E ço cunsent bien lur nature. / Mainte meschine unt deceüe / E en tel guise purgeüe”] (7445-54).
Layamon’s description of the incubi, harmful only in their ability to deceive (of course, a highly masculinist description, as their rape and impregnation of women hardly seems harmless), does not differ significantly from Wace’s.\(^5\) However, the verb that is translated as “making sport” of the maidens carries far more severity in the Old French than the English translation suggests; *purgeüe*, from the infinitive *porgesir*, means to know carnally by force.\(^5\) Thus, the text centralizes sexual transgressions as the foundation on which heroism can be born. In this case, as in the case of Uther’s rape of Igerne, the transgressions are not simply deceptions or sly challenges to normative sex and gender ideals, but intimate and intense violations of female bodies. While other moments of gendered and sexual transgression can challenge limits and reassert the potency of lives outside the norm, these conceptions demand attention to the sacrifices made in the name of masculinist union and community. Geoffrey’s account of Corineus and Gogmagog suggests the necessity and desirability of monstrosity at the foundation of British mythology; subsequent accounts of the violence of masculine aggression in the lineage of Britain’s heroes expose the abuse of transgressive potential in the name of empire, the sacrifice of both female and giant bodies and subjectivities to reify the illusion of a unified nation.

*Costs of Belonging*

This chapter has focused on the creative potential of including transgression and ambiguity within the figurative walls of home. How does the master narrative shift when it’s revealed not only to desire but also to need those transgressions to maintain its self-reflexive identity? For one, the power that’s associated with its dominant nature is shown to be temporal

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\(^5\) *Layamon’s Brut* 145
\(^5\) I am grateful to Dr. Sautman for bringing this unusual verb to my attention.
and temporary, a painted veneer disguised as natural in the quest to maintain a constructed hierarchy of ideals and normativity. Beyond the construction of normativity, aberrance too is revealed to be constructed, as that normativity which marks it as other, as transgressive, as aberrant, is nothing more than an image.

And yet despite discussion of the construction and superficiality of such images, the fact remains that such images and pretensions hold an overwhelming amount of power. The force of domination, temporal or not, is maintained through repetitive citations of power in the name of normativity. Those deemed monstrous certainly shape the master narrative, regardless of how far to the margins that narrative tries to relegate them, but that doesn’t negate that relegation; the power that can be reclaimed through bodily autonomy and the desire for the potency of such transgressions doesn’t erase the violence that such uneasy transgression often inspires. In moving forward, it’s important to consider equally these oppositional claims: that sexed and gendered ambiguity and transgressions, in all their specific nuances, have proven to be extremely potent for the genesis of subjective identity; that this potency, while desirable, occupies a space of unease; that this unease is simultaneously productive and destructive. Evaluating these oppositional claims requires a continual scrutiny of who benefits from ambiguity. In particular situations, ambiguity and monstrosity, both literal and figurative, can be beneficial for the subjects themselves, such as with the vengeful women dressed as men who save their kingdom from Kings Wanis and Melga. Often, however, the deployment of ambiguity in a tale functions to solidify the center at the expense of the margins, as the ambiguous or monstrous subjects, such as the women who settle Albion, are excised from the tale so that normative society can remain dominant.

Chapter Two – The Specter of the Subject: Forging Body Limits in Medieval Romance
While Chapter One focuses on mythologized representations of history, Chapter Two focuses instead on more explicitly fictional narratives: those of the romance genre. There is significant overlap between romance and historiography, as both rely on sensationalized accounts of events in projecting ideal images both of the imagined community and of the subjects who constitute that community. Yet romance has the freedom to veer further into the explicitly fictional and sensationalized, and thus provides important material for considering the intersections of fantasy and biases of idealism that undergird collective identity. Romances provide the lurid variations of a genre that tests out the boundaries of acceptable or normative behavior, and yet, the genre itself provides the assurance that the status quo will be upheld, that by the end of the poem, wrongs will be righted and aberrations will be straightened out. In terms of possibilities for gender, romance’s promise of righting wrongs invites questions of self-reconfiguration; the poems that I introduce and discuss below represent characters who construct identities for themselves throughout the course of their respective narratives, intimating different ways of fashioning viable selfhood in accordance with social demands.

Yet despite the promise of the genre to uphold normativity, a survey of several romances demonstrates that, much like the foundation myths of the previous chapter, normativity often correlates with the incorporation and maintenance of monstrous, aberrant, and transgressively gendered behavior within its reach. As Nicola McDonald argues, “[k]ey to modern scholarship’s ambivalence about the kind of pleasure that romance generates is the assumption that it is passive, a pleasure that comes from consumption, without thought or agency, of standardised products that espouse normative ideologies” (12). There is a certain attractive quality to the idea
that the romance promises a return to the status quo, solutions to all the chaotic transgressions and tangles encountered in its plot. Yet, McDonald is correct to call attention to this attraction as being an assumption rather than a truth. This chapter considers the perhaps-subconscious pleasures of the roiling ambiguities and transgressions that not only inform, but also compose, those allegedly normative ideologies. Indeed, McDonald does not simply rehash scholarship that claims the romance genre as a retainer or catalyst for normativity. Instead, she contends:

Popular romance is (despite its predilection for the happy endings that seem to confirm social norms and dominant ideologies) an imaginary space – I would argue the pre-eminent imaginary space in medieval English literature – in which the transgression of cultural boundaries is both embodied and explored; this transgression is sometimes punished, sometimes rehabilitated, and sometimes accommodated, but it is never repressed. (16)

The image of normative confirmation in conjunction with the reality of its constituent transgressions produces what McDonald calls “happy endings.” In other words, romances seem to end with neat images of the restored status quo, the chaotic world turned right-side-up and reordered according to safe hierarchies; it is the thought of these neat summations that provide the pleasure of completion, despite the possibilities for implicitly dis-ordered hierarchies. Indeed, Frederic Jameson describes genres themselves as “essentially contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather, to use the term which Claudio Guillén has so usefully revived, they are literary institutions, which like the other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts” (135). The romance genre thus provides the assurance of the natural dominance of order, of the teleological tendency toward the social institutions that enable the maintenance of hierarchy.
Yet image and reality are not always and assuredly consonant; the neat endings of romances in which the two are conflated often are unsettled by all of the transgressions that make them possible. In this chapter’s texts, *Sir Gowther; Richard Coer de Lion;* and the *Roman de Silence,* proper Christian militant masculinity is intertwined with gender out of bounds, both in terms of blurred and intermixed categories (in other words, ambiguity) and crossed or shattered boundaries (or, transgression). While ambiguity and transgression are not, of course, mutually exclusive terms and can overlap, they are different modes of challenging normativity and produce different possibilities for rethinking and resisting proscriptive identity categories. Indeed, heteronormative gender relations are a key factor in the romance genre, as they help deliver the promise of dynastic succession; thus, gendered ambiguity and transgression resonate particularly with romance, as they suggest the possibility of alternative social models. Even Northrop Frye’s description of romance as a mode implicitly points to the uneasy tensions that subtend the image of normativity and social reification: “the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (193). Thus, the reinscription of male and female characters within dynastic and patriarchal hierarchies, a characteristic of the romance genre, is a figurative bandage over the messier, unruly possibilities for gender that the romances paradoxically suggest. With Frye’s description in mind, the wish-fulfilment aspect of the romance seems to suggest that the desire for the status quo often translates to a desire for superficial imagery, under the surface of which remain all the ambiguous and transgressive elements and individuals not easily or even possibly assimilated into the categories projected by that superficial normative image. It is this desire for both the image and the ambiguous elements that underlie it that lends potency to that very desire; the revisionary and expansive limit-challenging qualities allow for

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53 *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957)
the maintenance of a palatable image, and all the while that image deploys its border-crossers and outliers as factions at times governing or even subverting the hierarchy.

While Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon all write variations on the same basic text, *Sir Gowther, Richard Coer de Lyon, and the Roman de Silence* are all profoundly different romances, presenting variations on what ideal subjectivity looks like within their respective texts. As per usual for medieval romance, the ideals boil down to a Christian warrior man establishing the dominance of good over evil, however that binary works out in the particular romance. Jameson even suggests “that the most important of … organizational categories is the conceptual opposition between good and evil, under which all the other types of attributes and images (light and darkness, high and low, etc.) are clearly subsumed” (140). Within these conceptual oppositions are, of course, the establishment of good and light and high as dominant and desirably ideal while evil, darkness, low become aberrances, weaknesses to be defeated. Yet those ideals, this chapter argues, are attainable because of their aberrant counterparts; in the Brut Chronicles, the projected idealism of British governance over Albion is possible only because of the transgressive pride and sexuality of Albina and her sisters. Arthur and Merlin become mythological folklore heroes *because* of their demonic lineages.

The aberrations at the foundations not just of normativity, but also of heroism and idealism, thus might be more appropriately considered catalysts; rather than total deviations from constructed norms and ideals, they suggest the full potential of subjects without the strictures of “decency.” They embody both the brute strength and aggression needed for dominance and militancy as well as the shame afforded to those monstrous others without proper communal conditioning. In other words, the “aberrations” stand in for power without restraint, violence without direction, or society without membership rules, so to speak. Placing those monstrous
others in places of abjection or shame constitutes a degree of superiority, a marker of community membership to which those others are not part. Yet as with Gogmagog’s Leap and Helen’s Tomb, as well as the countless other artifacts of monstrosity within “proper” English community, those notions of what’s right and proper gain a sense of legitimacy from keeping those others well within their sights. This idea of an artifact of monstrosity or ambiguity is key to understanding the construction of idealism and a desirable aberration. An artifact is, of course, a human creation, and thus ambiguity and normativity can be seen as mutually constitutive terms; each can’t exist without the other, and thus while societies might seek to construct themselves in terms of what they are not, those excisions remain an integral part of the societies that purport to shun them. As Elizabeth Waters argues in regards to how the *Roman de Silence* in particular deals with this distinction, an overt insistence on the rigidity of a binary gender systems “recalls conventional wisdom that the schoolyard bully only puts other down because he is insecure about himself; this text only refutes possibilities of multiple gender identification because it worries that they do exist, within the text and potentially outside it as well” (37). This anxiety, I argue, is evident even within romances that do not deal explicitly with the limits of gender.

*Sir Gowther* gives the tale of a vicious young man of demonic origin who must undergo a series of penances to become a proper Christian man. It is extant in two late-fifteenth century manuscripts, both likely originating from the Northeast Midlands. Despite variations between the two manuscripts in tone and content, both depict the extreme levels of Gowther’s pre-penance hybrid human-spirit diabolism, suggesting the importance of violence and demonic origin to his conversion process.54 Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, Gowther’s conversion does not transform his violence into properly peaceful behavior. Instead, violence is integral to ideal Christian subjectivity, and so rather than diminish his hyperaggression, Gowther learns to direct

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54 “Sir Gowther: An Introduction,” ed. A. Laskaya and E. Salisbury
it against the Saracen enemy as he becomes the star of the battlefield, reconfiguring his initially vampiric, cannibalistic, and sacrilegious violence as something necessary for the endurance of the Christian empire. Thus, Gowther’s masculinity is one of a penitential transformation; his post-penitential subjectivity must recall his pre-conversion savagery in establishing the worthiness of his place in society.

*Richard Coeur de Lyon*, written around the fourteenth-century and likely based on a now-lost Anglo-Norman romance from c. 1230-1250, is the fictionalized romance account of Richard the Lion-Hearted. Like Gowther, Richard too is of demonic origin, yet he need not undergo a conversion process to reconfigure his violence into desirable military prowess. Instead, his English masculinity becomes mythologized, like Arthur, as he quite literally cannibalizes the Saracen world. While Gowther is the figure who must be transformed to be depicted as a member of his society, Richard’s *surroundings* are what must be reconfigured so that his violence can become the marker of proper English militancy. His masculine identity is the proverbial “you are what you eat,” and Richard’s consumption includes both the literal and the figurative; from the lion’s heart and the Saracens that he eagerly gobbles up to the wife and the stories that he metaphorically subsumes, Richard’s identity is located at the crux of what he can conquer. Thus his masculinity, like Gowther’s, is one that depends on violence and brutality. Yet Richard, unlike Gowther, undergoes neither a penitential transformation nor an explicit incorporation into a heteronormative dynasty; rather, his unrepentant subjectivity represents a fantasy of the boundaries of masculinity.

*The Roman de Silence*, a thirteenth-century romance written in Old French but imagined to be about England, is markedly different from the previous two texts, and not merely in terms of its continental provenance. While *Gowther* and *Richard* construct images of ideal masculinity
by testing out the bounds of hyperaggressive behavior, the *Roman de Silence* imagines the literal boundaries of transgressively gendered behavior; Silence, named female at birth but socialized as male in order to occupy a male social gender, becomes the battleground for the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture to stake their dominance. All three romances resonate with a trans theory oriented framework, with subjects whose gendered performances are monitored and transformed for acceptable models of viability, and yet *Silence* most explicitly engages with questions of transgender-like identity and perception. While the romance narrates that, by the end, Nature wins out over Nurture and that assigned sex equals social gender, the conclusion rests on uneasy grounds; Nature has been revealed to be just as much a construction as Nurture. Silence’s character, then, suggests that the transgressive potential of gender is an integral component to the establishment of normativity, that a binary gender system is an oversimplification of the possibilities for gendered behavior and expression. Silence’s masculinity, like Gowther’s and Richard’s, represents another fantasy about the boundaries of possibility for masculine subjectivity; by engaging in literal transformations, both corporeal and sartorial, the *Roman* questions the uneasy balance between the ideas that gender could be either skin-deep and mutable or inherent and embodied.

Overall, these three romances, while certainly not fully representative of the genre as a whole, cover a broad range of the genre’s characteristic elements and can be particularly useful for considering the implications of desirable ambiguity. The play of these romances with ambiguously human figures provokes readers to imagine how far from the norm a human can veer, how hard the fabric of proper society can be pulled, before recognizable society dissipates. Yet that play also provides the implicit assurance that aberrance will always be reincorporated and assimilated into recognizable structures, suggesting the tendency of the world to veer toward
what is “natural.” Here, I call attention to the irony of the idea of constructing the “natural” or the norms, with indebtedness to Karma Lochrie’s conceptualization of medieval normativity and the perversity of N/nature. As she argues, “[n]atural’ and ‘unnatural’…were not medieval code words for ‘heterosexual’ and ‘perverse’. In fact,… Nature was often said in medieval texts to give rise to the ‘unnatural’, that is, it was not immune from the perverse” (Heterosyncrasies xxii). While the chapter on foundation myths pays particular attention to the idea of beginnings and how communities forge their mythologies through imagining the various births that inform their social worlds, this chapter pays particular attention to endings; what sorts of work must a community undertake to project the image of a happy ending? How does the construction of that image rely not on excising aberrance but on working through uneasy desire for ambiguous subjectivity? Or, in other words, how does the projection of an ideal and binarily gendered subject necessitate a challenge to those binary terms? In moving forward, a discussion of each of the romances individually will suggest how their final images of the recuperated hero or heroine seems to stand in for the imagined nation’s idealized subject; yet, those ideals undermine their own projections of unity and homogeneity, as they become possible only by working through the community’s reimagining of their terms of viable subjectivity.

Sir Gowther: Canine Masculinity and Becoming Social

I begin with Sir Gowther because of the largely individualized nature of its story; at stake is the conversion and recuperation of one man’s life. The poem is extant in two manuscripts, the British Library’s MS Royal 17. B. 43 and the National Library of Scotland’s MS Advocates’ 19.
3. 1, to which I will hereafter refer as Royal and Advocates. Alcuin Blamires describes the different manuscripts as focusing on, respectively, the romance’s latent religious configuration and its latent social meaning (47-48). Despite these differences, Blamires concludes:

There has been too much critical wrangling about whether it is a ‘knightly’ or a ‘hagiographical’ romance. The whole point is that it is both at once. […] [W]hat arguably most needs to be restored to view not only in discussion of *Sir Gowther* but in discussions of many romance narratives is the work that such romances do on behalf of the ideology of dynasty: their presentation and resolution of the pressures and anxieties and ‘demons’ besetting a dynastic society. (57)

Thus, despite the poem’s concentration on Gowther’s individual development, his life exists not in solitude, of course, but in conjunction with the many lives surrounding him. His hagiographical transformation from demonically aggressive warlord to properly Christian warrior is bound up with his social interactions and communal identity. Andrea Hopkins rightly identifies *Sir Gowther* as a poem concerned with penitence and salvation, claiming that “Gowther’s being a knight is extended from being a mere circumstance of the story, to becoming a metaphor for the condition of his soul and his progress toward salvation” (158). Jeffrey Cohen writes that “[t]he trajectory of the narrative postulates an originary gigantism for the masculine corpus, introjecting everything other romances write as exterior to the hero’s body, and then plunges Gowther so deep into monstrousness that he will emerge purified, sanctified” (“The Body Hybrid” 121). I would argue further that this personal salvation and purification is intertwined with larger questions about the restoration of Christendom. Thus, Gowther becomes an apt reminder of how an imagined community, while seemingly faceless, is constituted of its

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55 Anna Chen argues that the Advocate version is particularly interested in excessive consumption, following Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, who argue that “many of these differences suggest that Royal was probably intended for a more cultured and refined audience.”
individuals, necessitating the conversion of those individuals to community members; in the same manner that Gowther embodies monstrosity to emerge, ultimately, sanctified, the Christian community undergoes a process of incorporating the monstrous, the Other, the Saracen to emerge unified and seemingly dominant.

Sir Gowther begins with a fairly common invocation, although as Hopkins observes, it is an invocation with a tone of anxiety that sets the narrative against a “background of the great cosmic struggle between God and the Devil for the possession of men’s souls” (164). The invocation reads:

God, that art of myghtis most,
Fader and Sone and Holy Gost,
That bought man on Rode so dere,
Shilde us from the fowle fende,
That is about mannys sowle to shende
All tymes of the yere! (1-6)\(^{56}\)

The invocation, while seemingly unremarkable because of its stock nature, calls upon God to shield men’s souls from the foul fiend waiting to pounce on them; it is not a blessing but a plea for protection. As Emily Rebekah Huber argues, the invocation “is framed in part as a warning against miscegenation, anticipating the terror of Gowther’s conception and birth, and the fear of hypothetical offspring of the Sultan and the Emperor’s daughter—not only cross-gens, but emphatically cross-species” (288). Indeed, the tale then indulges in the details of the beast

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\(^{56}\) *Sir Gowther*, ed. Laskaya & Salisbury. The edition by Laskaya and Salisbury is based on the Advocates version of the poem. Of the differences between the Royal and Advocates versions of the poem, the editors say that the Royal is likely intended for a more elite audience and presents the story in a milder and less violent fashion, for example, omitting the scene in which Gowther rapes and pillages a convent of nuns (“Introduction”). Alan Ambrisco argues that the Advocates version helps develop the romance’s “latent religious configuration” while the Royal version helps develop the “latent social meaning” (47-48).
within, the literal monstrous origins of Gowther waging war for control of his subjectivity from within his own body. Reading past the invocation for its particularities, the poem emphasizes how Gowther’s aggressive identity develops not just as a result of his demonic patrilineage, but also in relation to the world around him; that “fowle fende” seemingly embodied in Gowther during his early years feeds its brutality in relation to the “mannys sowle” in the world around him.

While the foundation myths overtly consider the physical borders of subjectivity—the literal bounds between human and monster, the domination and governance of land—these romances consider more explicitly the interior designs of subjectivity. This is not to say that individual subjectivity is not often at stake, but rather, that collective subjectivity instead is of utmost explicit concern. While, as with many romances, *Sir Gowther* features hotly contested battles between Christendom and the pagan Saracens, the focus is on Gowther’s interior transformation as a result of his participation in such feats. Indeed, the chaotic conditions of his birth and early life set up the necessity of such a transformation. Born as the result of an incubus raping the Duke of Austria’s wife, Gowther leads a similarly violent life:

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This chyld within hur was no nodur,
Bot eyvon Marlyon halfe brodur,
For won fynd gatte hom bothe;
..........................................................
Tho Duke hym gard to kyrke beyre,
Crystond hym and cald hym Gwother,
That sythyn wax breme and brathe. (97-108)
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Kin to Merlin via their incubus father, Gowther mirrors Merlin in his supernatural energy, and indeed, Gowther refuses to abide by the rules of being human. Rather than exhibit infant vulnerability, he murders his wet nurses by vampirically sucking them dry: “He sowked hom so threi lost ther lyvys, / Sone had he sleyne three!” (113-14). Rather than drink his mother’s milk for sustenance, he tears off her nipple: “His modur fell afowle unhappe, / Upon a day bad hym tho pappe, / He snaffulld to hit soo / He rofe tho hed fro tho brest” (127-30).

Beyond simply describing Gowther’s horrific violence in his infancy, the account presents a subject who defies all characterizations of a human infant. His hunger quite literally knows no bounds and he tears apart his mother’s body in his uncontrollable aggression. As Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury note, “[t]hat the infant Gowther is able to tear off his mother’s nipple suggests the presence of teeth. Early dentition was often regarded as an indication of a child’s extraordinary future and was frequently associated with dog-like attributes. […] Early dentition could also be a characteristic of vampirism, werewolfism, or the consequence of sorcery” (n. 130). Angela Florscheutz posits that it “conflates and links normative and transgressive consumptions of blood represented in nursing and violence, linking both of these types of bloodthirstiness with imagery suggesting the Eucharist” (34). Cohen argues that “no place exists for him within the feminine, domestic spaces represented by the parade of nurses and his mother; even the maternal breast is torn to pieces. Gowther, from infancy, resists familialism” (“The Body Hybrid” 124). Gowther’s violence thus marks him as uncategorizable; he could be simultaneously human, supernatural, non-human animal, all the while unassimilable to social and familial structures. His monstrosity, whether figurative or literal, suggests the threat he poses to the society in which he lives, but does not participate; he is present but not participant. The human nature of the progeny of women and incubi was not necessarily clear, as even Thomas
Aquinas “did not deny that demons could assume human form to have intercourse with mortal women; yet he maintained that the bodies they formed for the purpose could not be considered human and any children begotten in this way could only result from stolen human semen (“Sir Gowther” n. 17). Whether Gowther is born from stolen human semen or from the supernatural matter of the incubus, he certainly inherits the transgressive potential of completely overpowering the bounds of normative human behavior.

His boundless aggression and appetite not only threatens the physical safety of those people around him, but also, as he grows, destroys the imagined unity of the communities in which he resides:

Be that he was fifteen yere of eld
He made a wepon that he schuld weld,
No nodur mon myght hit beyr;
A fachon bothe of style and yron,
Wytte yow wyll he wex full styron
And fell folke con he feyr. (139-44)

If Gowther were able to wield that falchion for the good of Christendom, as he will do after his penance, such abundant strength would be quite the desirable characteristic. Indeed, Blamires notes that “Medieval culture conventionally applauds the production of inheritors of notable physique and indomitable power” (53). Yet that penance, of course, is still to come, and Gowther’s brutish aggression remains directed inward, wreaking havoc on the very Christian community of which he is a part. E.M. Bradstock argues that, beyond simply signifying violence, the falchion is “an apt weapon for a ferocious persecutor of Christians. Further, like its Saracen creators who had ‘their dark origins in the race of Cain’ but were always reclaimable through

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baptism, and like Gowther himself who was born of a devil, this falchion has the potential for good or evil” (7). The earliest images of Gowther, while decidedly violent, also call attention to his inherently ambiguous nature; crossing the boundaries between Christian and Saracen, between civilized militarism and animalistic violence, between human and demon, Gowther represents, in his hybrid body, the disastrous results of breaking across the limits of social hierarchies and categories. The violence of this limit-breaking builds throughout his youth, as by the time he is “Duke of greyt renown” (169) he cannot bear to hear the sounds of matins or of mass, an intransigence explicitly linked to his demonic patrilineage:

   Erly and late, lowde and styll,
   He wold wyrke is fadur wyll
   Wher he stod or sete. (175-77)

Rather than hold the opposing sides of his demonic father and Christian mother in static tension, the young Gowther becomes increasingly isolated from his matrilineal heritage, an isolation rather blatantly foreshadowed by his infant savagery toward his own mother in her attempts to breastfeed him. His ambiguous lineage becomes, thus, less and less ambiguous as his demonic father’s influence waxes dominant. The young Gowther, then, seems to suggest the dangers of ambiguity left unchecked, of transgressed borders better left in place.

Yet the turning point in the narrative of Gowther’s seemingly boundless violence comes immediately after his most sacrilegious act. While hunting in the woods, an activity that he declares he “lufde…aldur best,” he encounters a nunnery and is met by the prioress and her convent (178). He thus encounters the literal convergence of his demonic violence and his matrilineal Christian roots. It is especially apt for Gowther to experience this encounter while hunting, as the nunnery takes the place of the hunted animal, an exchange that literalizes
Gowther’s increasing isolation from his own humanity and the subsuming of human conduct beneath demonic aggression. The reactions of the prioress and her convent to Gowther and his men suggest the physical hints of the monstrous overtaking the human:

Thei wer full ferd of his body,
For he and is men bothe leyn hom by –
Tho sothe why schuld y hyde?
And sythyn he spard hom in hor kyrke
And brend hom up, thus con he werke;
Then went his name full wyde. (187-92)

Gowther, whose notoriety has been spreading throughout his burgeoning adulthood, achieves his fullest renown as a result of this final violence; by raping and burning the nuns, he not only achieves his most lurid acts of violence yet, but he also threatens to completely shatter any connection to his own humanity. His rape of the nuns seems to mirror his demon father’s rape of his mother, as he commits the same acts of violence that engendered his own birth. His subsequent murder of the nuns emphasizes, then, not the potential for birth and recuperation, but for the destruction of Christendom as a result of Gowther’s tainting presence. Indeed, as Laskaya and Salisbury comment, “[t]hat the prioress and her charges should be frightened of Gowther’s body underscores his diabolical appearance. The absence of armor suggests Gowther’s rejection of chivalric codes of conduct” (n. 187). In addition to this rejection of chivalry, the absence of armor emphasizes Gowther’s bare body. While he is not necessarily nude, the absence of armor reconfigures his violence as an extension of his own brute strength and aggression, as opposed to a form of militaristic domination.
This climax of Gowther’s unrestrained violence, focusing on the appearance of his body and his isolation from social mores, locates him as being not at the crux of humanity and monstrosity, of Christianity and devilry, but tending sharply toward the latter positions of those binaries. Threatening to obliterate completely any ties he might have had to the former positions of those binaries, Gowther’s violence is halted in its tracks by a forced confrontation with the consequences of his own lineage and actions, as an old earl of his country questions him:

‘Syr, why dose thu soo?

We howpe tho come never of Cryston stryn,

Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn,

That werkus hus this woo.

Thu dose never gud, bot ey tho ylle –

We hope thu be full syb tho deyll.’ (207-12)

The old earl, holding a metaphoric mirror to the incompatibility of Gowther’s actions with a Christian lineage, halts the narrative’s increasing violence. As Morton W. Bloomfield argues in his study on the use of episodic motivation in epics and romances, “romances tend to have apparently unmotivated episodes in them, often episodes of crucial important to the story” (106). So, while the progression of episodes thus far has been rather poorly motivated, moving from one lurid act of violence to the next, they are clearly linked by their increasing violence and foreshadowed by Gowther’s infantile vampirism. The old man’s interruption of that increasing violence thus marks the crux of Gowther’s development, just at the moment when his aggression threatens to spiral out of control. Gowther’s moment of being forced to contemplate his own existence returns him to the crossroads of his own ambiguous past; rather than obliterate his ties
to Christendom in favor of his devilish lineage, he now faces the potential of utilizing that ambiguous lineage for reconfiguring himself into an ideal subject.

His immediate reaction to the old man, while characteristically aggressive and defensive, points to this potential, as he barks at the old earl, “Syr, and thu ly on mee, / Hongud and drawon schall thu bee / And never qwyccke heythyn goo” (214-16). His threats of torture and execution seem to return him to his devilish subjectivity, and yet the conditional nature of those threats suggests instead the potential birth of a self-conscious subjectivity, concerned with truth and moral consequences. Hopkins claims that this is the “first time we get a glimpse of Gowther responding to the world around him personally, rather than Gowther the agent of the Devil working his father’s will” (173). Indeed, this is the first moment that Gowther’s ambiguous hybridity begins to tend toward the humane, rather than the devilish. His subsequent actions continue to fix him in a place of moral ambiguity, as he hurries to his mother’s castle to question her about his lineage. He “sette his fachon to hur hart” and demands, under pain of death, that she reveal his lineage (223). Again, his aggression in response to being confronted with his own lineage is characteristic of the devilish violence he has committed thus far, but his concern with truth and self-consciousness suggests the reconfiguration of that violence into a subjectivity more aligned with social ideals; the falchion pointed at Gowther’s mother’s chest emphasizes this ambivalent potential, as Gowther retains the power to kill or to listen, to be subsumed entirely beneath his devilish lineage or to harness his aggression for Christendom.

The remainder of the tale, as can be expected from a romance, focuses on Gowther’s penance and recuperation as he forms his ideal Christian subjectivity. That recuperation has been the subject of much critical attention. What I would add to the existing criticism is this focus on his transgressive and hypertrophic masculinity as the source, the direct catalyst, and the vital

58 See, for example, Hopkins, Robson, and Charbonneau.
foundation for the formation of Gowther’s reputation and identity as “Goddus child; / The thar not dowt tho warlocks wyld, / Ther waryd mot he bee” (673-75). This final image of Gowther presents his identity as God’s child in direct opposition to his release from the bonds of his wild warlock lineage, and yet that opposition is dependent upon Gowther’s constant vigilance over his devilish potential. In other words, while that wild warlock heritage is depicted as violent and evil, it is vital for Gowther’s formation of a Christian subjectivity, and thus a necessary and desirable component of the foundation of Christian subjectivity both within and beyond the tale. The account of Gowther’s recuperation, after his moment of recognition of his own lineage, continually returns to imagery of his liminality, such as his attachment to his falchion; Gowther fashions it himself at age fifteen (140-44), threatens his mother with it when forcing her to tell the truth about his patrilineage (223), refuses to give it up when the Pope tells him he must do so as part of his penance (289-94), and ultimately disguises himself and uses it to defeat the Saracens and defend the Emperor’s daughter (421-444). The Emperor, unaware of Gowther’s identity when he is in disguise, comments in wonder that the unidentified knight has a “fochon … full styffe of stele” that is key for defeating the Saracens, thus pointing to Gowther’s identification with his falchion (493). These moments suggest not simply his conversion to proper Christianity, but his return to ambiguity and his transformation of unbridled violence into a source of reformed subjectivity. Rather than being given over wholly to his demonic patrilineage, these subsequent conversionary moments reconfigure that demonic heritage into the desirable power and aggression necessary for the image of the proper Christian warrior.

With the old earl ruling in his stead as he rides toward Rome in search of penance and absolution, Gowther holds onto his falchion: “He laft hit not for weyle ne wrake, / Hyt hong ei be his syde” (260-61). Rather than repress or excise reminders either of his demonic or of his
ambiguous potential, he maintains them on his person; as with his encounter with the nuns, his
body remains the image of his ambiguity. Even after he confesses his crimes to the pope, who
demands that he “[l]ye down thi fachon then the fro” (289), Gowther refuses to part from his
falchion, insisting that “[t]his bous me nedus with mee beyr, / My frendys ar full thyn” (293-94).
Gowther’s ambiguously Saracen weaponry thus retains its status as more than an accessory, as
his attitude toward it marks it as a vital extension of his own self. His penance, then, depends
upon his ability not to excise markers of his ambiguous lineage, but to reconfigure them into
agents of Christian warrior masculinity.

While Gowther refuses to abandon his falchion in accordance with his assigned penance,
he obeys with perfect diligence the remainder of the Pope’s order:

Wherser thu travellys, be northe or soth,

Thu eyt no met bot that thu revus of howndus mothe

Cum thy body within;

Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud,

Or thu reyde tokyn have fro God,

That forgyfyn is thi syn. (295-300)

His penance thus requires him to become like a non-human animal, eating the same food as dogs
and remaining devoid of verbal communication. Yet he also must wait for a divine sign of
absolution, suggesting that he does indeed maintain his human faculties of reason and discretion,
despite performing a degree of non-human animality. Just as his ambiguous lineage fueled both
his violence and his undeniable potency, his ambiguous location between human and non-human
animal fuels his recuperation of that violence into proper masculinity. As Cohen argues,
“Gowther gains his adult identity as knight, hero, and saint [by] mapping the potentialities of his
unsocialized self across the grid of the canine bodies with whom he shares food and place” (Becoming Male 220). Indeed, Gowther rises to the occasion, as he takes his place among the dogs of a Christian emperor’s court and subsequently fights on behalf of the emperor’s daughter against the Saracen sultan; the sultan desires the daughter’s hand in marriage, but the emperor declares, “y wyll not, be Cryst wonde, / Gyffë hor to no hetho hownde” (391-92). Thus Gowther, in disguising himself and fighting on behalf of the Christians, utilizes the violence and aggression of his demonic youth but channels his efforts through the proper channels for Christian male subjectivity. By hiding his identity, as “[n]on hym knew” but the similarly mute maiden, Gowther maintains his status as liminally human; he remains silent and continues to refuse all food but that from the mouths of dogs (437). Because he is not recognized for his actions on behalf of the maiden, he is able to continue practicing his penance and thus to continue reconfiguring his demonic potential into desirable Christian warrior aggression.

Indeed, shortly before his identity is revealed and the narrative presents him as a fully recuperated character, Gowther is at the height of his violence:

To whyle Syr Gwother freschely faghtte
Mony a doghtté hors is deythe ther kaghtte,
That he myghtte over reche;
All that he with his fawchon hytte
Thei fell to tho ground and ross not yette,
Nor lokyd aftur no leyche.
Bot he wold not for yre ne tene
No worde speyke, withowt wene,
For dowtte of Godus wreke;
If all he hongurt, noght he dyd eytte
But what he myght fro tho howndus geyt;
He dyd as tho Pwope con hym teche. (601-12)

This stanza, recounting first Gowther’s spectacular battlefield performance and then his diligence in obeying the Pope’s penance, suggests the equilibrium between his aggression and his self-control, between his demonic and his Christian lineage, and between his human and his non-human animal social roles. Shortly thereafter, when the maiden daughter wakes miraculously from her coma and names Gowther as the mysterious knight who has won the battle on her behalf, the Pope immediately absolves Gowther of his sins and declares him “Goddus chyld; / The thar not dowt tho warlocke wyld” (673-74). Yet while he is declared free from the grip of his demonic lineage, that very lineage gives him the supernatural strength he needs to fight off the Saracens. Indeed, the poem’s final image of Gowther describes him as “geyton with a felteryd feynd; / Grace he had to make that eynd / That God was of hym feyn” (748-50). Through God’s grace, Gowther is reconfigured as a proper Christian subject, despite having been begotten by a hairy fiend. The images of Gowther as a fully recuperated subject all emphasize his demonic lineage, suggesting, of course, the power of God’s grace to guide even the most sinful subjects back to faith, regardless of either lineage or previous sin.

However, such images also suggest the correlation of images of normative subjectivity with foundations of aberrance; Gowther’s rescue of the emperor’s daughter and his restoration to Christian human are enabled precisely through his demonic lineage and his potential for hypermasculine aggression, on his potential for being more violent than the Saracen sultan. Thus the image of miraculous conversion should be read not simply as suggesting the power of God’s grace, but also as suggesting the power of transgressing boundaries and pushing back on the
limits of acceptable behavior. The romance reveals that by maintaining the aesthetic *image* of being a recuperated and proper subject alongside the *reality* of its potential for constant transgression, transgression itself is the foundation of and the catalyst for socially constructed normative subjectivity.

*Richard Coeur de Lyon: Domination and Consumption in Negotiating Masculinity*

While the fourteenth-century romance *Richard Coeur de Lyon* is undoubtedly a fiction, based largely on a lost Anglo-Norman romance from c. 1230-50, it also has its roots in some historical reality, giving a luridly sensationalized account of Richard I of England. King from 1189 until his death in 1199, Richard was known for his military prowess, largely during the Third Crusade against Saladin of Jerusalem. However, despite Richard’s reputation as the lionhearted king of England, he was neither successful in regaining Jerusalem from Saladin, nor did he spend any considerable duration of time of his adult life in England. The romance version of his life, then, supplies many of the needed details to depict Richard as the quintessential English military champion. While Richard I certainly scored several major battlefield victories against Saladin, contributing to his reputation as Lion-Hearted, the romance Richard punches a lion through the throat to rip out and devour its raw heart, literalizing his historical moniker. The sensationalized accounts of Richard then transform his military victories over Saladin’s armies into literal ingestion of the Saracen warriors, turning English aspirations for victory into a cannibalistic, yet admirable, appetite for conquest and domination.

The cannibalism episodes already have been the focus of considerable critical attention, as a brief sketch of existing criticism will show. McDonald points out the anthropophagous act of eating the Eucharist as insinuating that “[e]ating people, that inveterate Christian taboo, is
simultaneously one of its most potent fantasies,” and that in relation to Richard Coeur de Lyon, “Richard’s consumption of the Saracen, constructed as both an alimentary necessity and an act of sacral devotion, provides the romance audience with a convenient focus for its own fantasies of religious supremacy, political dominion, nationalism and a good meal” (“Eating People” 143).

Geraldine Heng argues that:

[a]s England’s king, and the chief representative of the nation, Richard’s mastery of ideological manipulation is glimpsed in how deftly he turns an initially affectionate joke against himself, in the first cannibalism, into a collective hostile joke against the enemy, in the second cannibalism – extrapolating, in the process, a community called “England,” made up of “good,” “English,” “Christian mean” who are defined by their appetite for Muslims. (Empire of Magic 75)

Alan Ambrisco argues that the poem “embrace[s] cannibalism in an effort to promote an English identity and to set that identity apart from the ‘others’, both Muslim and French, against which the English forces of the poem find themselves aligned” and that such an effort “makes manifest the very anxiety it was trying to conceal: a deep-rooted ambivalence toward France, England’s long time enemy and erstwhile ally” (499-500). Cohen argues that the image of the broken body of Saracen people is so popular in romances in general that in Richard, the “English king is depicted as an enthusiastic cannibal of such bodies in pieces, recommending that all Englishmen ingest Saracen flesh to stay vigorous. Richard’s gastronomy merely renders a long-established site of textual enjoyment more visible by writing it in corporeal terms (“On Saracen Enjoyment” (128). Michael Uebel describes the cannibalism as a process of “fictioning,” the establishment of a fantasy of a communal English enjoyment of Saracen flesh, thus forging the image of a unified nation in the face of an enemy (44-51). This chapter focuses not only on revisiting and rethinking
the particularities of those already well-studied anthropophagous episodes, but also on moving beyond those popular moments to consider how the episodes between construct gendered identity.

From the accounts of Richard’s parents in the years before his birth, all the way to his death, seven thousand lines later, Richard prowls across England and continental Europe, shaming the inferior French, gobbling up any Saracens who get in his way, and all the while bringing glory to England through the transfiguration of his potentially demonic violence into proper Christian warriorhood. Such a depiction of admirable military prowess certainly is to be expected of an English Christian hero, and yet, like Gowther, Richard is of an ambiguously human and supernatural lineage with the potential for unchecked violence and aggression. It is my contention that this ambiguity in origin is what allows Richard, like Gowther, to achieve the image of being an ideal warrior. Unlike Gowther, though, Richard’s violent and barbaric behavior never is represented as something in need of recuperation; while Gowther’s violence threatens to spiral out of control as he wrecks havoc within the Christian and domestic spheres of his own community, Richard’s violence is always directed outward, always in opposition to some enemy threatening to encroach upon English domination. Thus, Richard does not need to undergo a process, like Gowther’s, of penance and recuperation into the Christian community. Rather, his foreign aggressions suggest, in their enduring existence, the very desirability of ambiguous origins and transgressive masculinities at the foundation of normative and idealized Christian subjectivity. Indeed, Uebel concludes that “[w]hat gets literalized by Richard is an internalization of the other that was never external in the first place” (51). Richard’s ultimate

59 “Richard,” from this point forward, signifies the romance version of Richard, not his historical counterpart, Richard I.
subjectivity, like Gowther’s, depends on maintaining and continually repudiating the monstrous traits that supposedly characterize others, and no longer the self.

While Girard’s discussion of the construction of a scapegoat resonates with many of the previous texts, nowhere does it seem more appropriate for lengthy discussion than in conjunction with Richard’s construction of his own English masculinity. Girard argues that the scapegoat’s “[m]oral monstrosity…actualizes the tendency of all persecutors to project the monstrous results of some calamity or public or private misfortune onto some poor unfortunate who, by being infirm or a foreigner, suggests a certain affinity to the monstrous” (34). As a body is its own assemblage of systems, any interruption to the assemblage reflects upon not only its fragility but further its capacity to come undone. The scapegoat, then, is seen to embody complete alterity, allowing a society to remain assured of its own unity and completeness. Further, this methodology, while certainly allowing a measure of self-containment for those dominant in a social group, simultaneously reflects back the fragility of its own construction; in other words, a scapegoat is constructed so that it can bear the burden of a social group’s anxieties and then be expelled from that group, carrying with it all of the uneasy tensions the dominant group would rather not confront or contain. Yet that expulsion is never truly complete: as Tomasch discusses, that scapegoated figure remains, sometimes literally but usually imaginarily, to be expelled over and over again, reifying the illusion of the dominant group’s own unity (244). As I discuss below, Richard himself stakes his hyperaggressive masculinity on the simultaneous expulsion and consumption of other identities.

In *Richard Coeur de Lion*, there are many figures that function at the margins in positions of alterity. Richard and the English position themselves in opposition to those figures as the distance between them becomes simultaneously more striking and more uncanny. In other words,
while Richard holds himself in opposition to a character, he constructs himself as more properly English, masculine, dominant. The other characters, such as Cassiodorien, Margery, Saladin and/or the Saracens, and even the French, assume the qualities expelled from those more desirable categories. Yet Richard simultaneously resonates with those rejected qualities, suggesting to the reader how very much alike the English and the other are. While it might be too easy to argue that the Saracens are feminized and thus stand in for the women as Richard’s uncanny opposite, the continual precession of scapegoat figures in the romance suggests that something far more complex is simultaneously at play. Following Girard’s suggestion that scapegoat figures bear the burden of the uneasy tensions that the dominant group would rather expel from its interior circles, the continual presence of a new scapegoat after the alleged elimination of the last points to Richard himself and the English as perpetual embodiments of all the qualities they sought to displace. Instead of needing to eliminate the scapegoat, the romance needs to reintroduce new incarnations of scapegoated others in alleged opposition to Richard, suggesting the necessity of maintaining alterity and ambiguity within the image of dominant English masculinity. While eating your enemy certainly is an effective way to boast your dominance, such consumption also had significant repercussions with theological understandings of resurrection.60 To summarize, you are what you eat. Thus, Richard is the Saracens, the women, the stories, and the lion’s heart that he either literally or metaphorically consumes, and so he always needs someone new to stand at the margins and keep him in the center. His accession to dominance depends on reconfiguring alterity as something desirable, on constructing himself in opposition to those allegedly weaker others but then allowing the distinctions to collapse.

60 For a detailed discussion of consumption and post-resurrection embodiment, see Karl Steel’s How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages, esp. Chapter 3, “In and Out of Mortal Flesh.”
As one of the noteworthy characteristics of *Richard Coeur de Lyon* is its near-total absence of female characters, this chapter first discusses the two moments in the poem where female characters play active roles. Richard’s identity is inherently bound to Cassiodorien through birth and to Margery through marriage, and indeed, one of the typical ways that romance heroes achieve their image of masculinity is by placing themselves in opposition to a female character. Whether or not this woman is afforded agency throughout the narrative, the male character tends to develop a dominant identity in opposition to her alleged subservience and passivity. Louise Sylvester examines the structure of this tendency, arguing that the romance genre provides a script for the construction of heterosexuality: “for a woman to get the sex that she wants, she must take up a position of refusal, passivity, and lack of responsibility” (144). As Sylvester’s argument insinuates, those allegedly normative categories, such as a binary or hierarchical gender system, depend on their status as a self-consciously produced image rather than an inherent reality.

Next, this chapter considers the construction of masculinity and femininity despite the absence of female characters. In that absence, Richard comes to embody both masculinity and femininity in his occupation of the position of an ideal. Such an ambiguous embodiment of gender suggests both that the image of binary gender is a construction and also that such a construction is dependent upon its collapse. Similar to how Richard will, later in the romance, stake his dominant English warriorhood on his ability to gobble up the Saracens, his early interactions with women suggest that Richard’s masculinity embodies femininity and masculinity; his brutality correlates with his demonic matrilineage, as Fulk Doyly calls him “a devil,…and no true man” (492), and his marriage to Margery exists largely to prove his chivalric heteronormative characteristics. Richard is notorious for his cannibalism of the Saracens; yet his
cannibalistic dominance begins long before he ever devours pagan flesh. Indeed, the romance, from beginning to end, depicts the dominant groups devouring, and thus maintaining, those marked with alterity.

As all reigns of dominance have to begin somewhere outside themselves, *Richard Coeur de Lyon* begins, as do many romances, with an account of its hero’s origins. Richard’s father, King Henry, seeks a wife in stereotypical romance fashion: she must have “gret tresore” (46) and she must be “þe ffeyreste wymman þat wore on liff” (51). This opening portrait of Richard’s parents equates masculinity with questing and domination, an association that also relegates femininity to being the rich and beautiful object of such a quest for domination. Yet this paradigm of masculine desire and conquest does not last once he does, in fact, acquire such a wife. The initial impressions of her femininity as decorative and mercantile prove to be merely a veneer; when she is forced to witness the transubstantiation against her will, she grabs her children and flies through the roof of the church to escape:

Sche took here douȝtyr in here hond,
And Johan her sone she wolde not wonde;
Out of the rofe she gan her dyght,
Openly before all theyr syght.
Johan fell frome her in that stounde,
And brak his thygh on the grounde.
And with her doughter she fled her waye,
That never after she was isey. (227-34)

On the surface, it makes sense for the romance narrative immediately to excise any element of the transgressive or supernatural feminine from the story; Cassiodorien is, quite literally,
incompatible with her Christian surroundings. Yet her rapid departure from the story suggests not only her alterity, but also the incompatibility of her independence with the model of gender that Henry proposes. In other words, Henry wants a wife who can be equated with material wealth and physical beauty. When Cassiodorien, despite her wealth and beauty, turns out to be incompatible with this model, she removes any vestige of her transgressive subjectivity from the narrative.\(^6\)

However, despite Cassiodorien’s disappearance, Richard remains, and he bears her supernatural background in his heritage. Thus, Richard embodies her transgressive femininity, and it is a femininity that resists Henry’s model of what gender should be; indeed, Richard pushes the bounds of masculinity, as his own identity verges on hyperaggression. It is important to note, however, that Richard’s embodiment does not suggest, necessarily, that the poem reclaims femininity as the foundation for the Christian empire-building that Richard will enact. Rather, by quickly eliminating the female body and making Richard’s aggression and violence the only vestige of his maternal lineage, the romance positions femininity in a position of alterity. In other words, the poem isolates masculine aggression as not only the ideal, but also the sole route to Christian English subjectivity.

However, the poem’s construction of a nearly wholly homosocial world depends upon the very transgressive femininity that it purports to reject. Besides the flight of Cassiodorien, the only other woman in the poem, Modred’s daughter Margery, is given a similarly abrupt departure from the action, seeming to function solely as a catalyst for the masculine action. In terms of Bloomfield’s discussion of episodic motivations, both Margery and Cassiodorien participate in the action so long as they can help enact the flow of events. Yet, this superficial

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\(^6\) Cassiodorien’s transgressive and secretive origins along with her abrupt flight share significant overlaps with the Old French story of Melusine.
rendering of feminine agency as abject or passive fails to consider how, both despite and because of that erasure of the female body, feminine agency is precisely what allows Christendom to come into its own subjectivity; women’s autonomy is subsumed into Richard’s actions.

Margery initially is depicted in a stereotypically passive romance image, enclosed within her bedchamber and burning with love for a distant male hero:

The kingys douȝtyr lay in her bour
Wiþ here maydenys off honour;
Margery here name hyȝt,
Sche louede Rychard wiþ al here myȝt. (881-84)

This initial image of Margery’s passivity, however, soon gives way to her role as active savior in Richard’s escape from prison. Immortalized by his moniker as “Lion-Hearted” for his barehanded defeat of the lion, Richard can defeat that lion because of Margery’s commands on his behalf:

Sche comaundyd þe jaylere
Meete and drynk to fette hym þere;
‘And þe yryns from hym take,
I comaunde þe, for my sake.
And afftyr soper, in þe euenyng,
To my chaumbyr þou hym bryng,
In þe atyr off a squyer:
Myselff j schal kepe hym þer.
Be Jhesu Cryst, and Seynt Symoun,
Þou schalt haue þy warysoun!’ (907-16)
The main images of Margery certainly position her in stereotypical positions: first, as love-struck and next, as intercessor on behalf of the active warrior. Indeed, she disappears from the narrative altogether shortly thereafter, remaining visible just long enough to shore up Richard’s masculinity; in an otherwise entirely homosocial world, Richard’s heterosexuality can be assured because of her momentary presence, and then the homogeny of the homosocial can remain untouched because of the disappearance of women from the narrative. However, it is not enough simply to view Cassiodorien and Margery as stock romantic figures functioning solely as catalysts for masculinist action. Indeed, their brief appearances in the narrative provide the transgressive impetus for the foundations of male activity. This is not to claim, however, that they are merely support or objects to be used and then excised in the pursuit of masculinist empire; rather, it is precisely this image of masculinist empire that depends upon excising the female body, which threatens to reveal the construction of male dominance over both women and empire.

As a direct result of Margery’s action on Richard’s behalf, Richard can slay the lion with his bare hands, a display that he follows with the lurid spectacle of devouring its heart. Once Richard completes the actions started by Margery’s intercession, Margery departs from the narrative just as quickly as Cassiodorien previously flies through the roof and out of the story. After King Modred releases Richard from imprisonment, he demands that Richard take Margery along with him. In response, the queen calls her daughter into her chambers and tells her:

‘Þou schalt dwelle wiþ me,

Tyl Kyng Rychard sende afftyr þee,

As a kynyng dos afftyr his qwene.

So j rede þat it schal bene.’ (1239–42)
Margery’s departure catalyzes the plot action, as Richard is now free from imprisonment and able to continue his quest for the Holy Land. However, it also shores up Richard’s masculinity; as the remainder of the narrative becomes concerned entirely with homosocial realms, Margery’s shadow ensures that Richard is not only a proper Christian warrior, but also well within the safety of the script for heterosexual romance, as Sylvester would name it.

However, this mere shadow of women falls far short of guaranteeing normativity. Indeed, as the romance continues, the constructions of masculinity and femininity do not hold up as mutually exclusive or constitutive in their binary formulations. The story, while no longer explicitly concerned with women, remains nonetheless invested in how actions and interactions construct understandings of gender. This final portrait of Margery and Richard, far from being merely a shadow of heteronormative constructions in the romance, points to the romance’s use of the image in oversimplifying gender. Ostensibly, Margery’s enclosure within familial domesticity, as her mother vows to keep her until Richard fetches her, returns her to the same passivity as the opening image of her languishing for love in her bedchamber; whereas Margery’s homosocial realm with her mother becomes aligned with passivity and enclosure, Richard’s homosocial realm with his armies and his enemies becomes aligned with violent activity and dominion over increasing swathes of territory. Certainly, it would not be incorrect to observe that the romance participates in stereotypically gendered traditions for crusading warrior and passive maiden. However, I’d argue that the romance’s heavy-handed construction of distinct homosocial realms for both Margery and Richard obfuscates a more complicated system of gender at work in the narrative.

The historical Richard certainly was no stranger to rumors of sodomy. William S. Burgwinkle points out that,
as in the case of his great-uncle, King William Rufus, Richard became a target of such [sodomitical] innuendo because he flaunted his disregard for cultural norms and expectations. Neither Richard nor William Rufus was heterosexual in the way that was expected of them, then or now. (81)

Yet even without historical documentation of the sexuality of Richard I, the romance about Richard, too, deviates from the ostensible constructions of Margery’s femininity and Richard’s masculinity as either natural or distinct categories. It is perhaps too obvious to discuss the substitution of Saracens for women as a way for Richard to shore up his masculinity against an oppositional other. Yet it is also an oversimplification simply to claim that Saladin and the Saracens occupy exactly the same space in the romance as Margery and Cassiodorien. In discussing Richard’s interactions, both with Saladin and with the Saracens, the remainder of this section will consider how masculinities are displayed, how femininities are constructed even in the absence of women, and how gender is complicated beyond its initial displays; while Cassiodorien and Margery fit into stereotypes about, respectively, both demonic and passive women, those images are superficial and mask the ways that they transgress their own stereotypes to complicate their identities. Those very transgressions, including Cassiodorien’s inassimilable hybrid lineage and Margery’s actions enabling Richard’s success against the lion, suggest that the stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity at the romance’s onset are monolithic oversimplifications. Having already discussed the initial implications of Richard’s interactions with women, this chapter will discuss the evolution, or perhaps simply reification, of gendered identity; after the romance ostensibly becomes no longer concerned with women, gender becomes filtered through the opposition of masculinity (as Christian Crusaders) to not-masculinity (as Saladin’s pagans and, to a degree, the French).
After both Cassiodorien and Margery have exited the romance, Richard ventures forth on his crusade, finally coming face to face with the Saracens with whom he has intended on engaging in combat from the very beginning of the narrative. These interactions with the enemy show them being boiled down to a single homogenous entity that allows them to occupy the space of a single actant. This is, of course, nothing unique in terms of nationalistic militarism. Here, however, such a monolithic image allows them to stand in as Richard’s oppositional counterpart. After a particularly tough winter that causes famine amongst Richard’s troops, his men are forced to kill and eat their own horses: “Þenne oure goode hors we sloewe, / Dede seþe, and eete þe guttys towe” (2845-46). This moment can be said to foreshadow the cannibalistic “joke” that Richard will soon play on the Saracens; the chivalric identity binds knight and horse, and so being forced to eat one’s own horse places that knight at risk of losing his knightly identity. Christian warrior masculinity feeds on itself and thus threatens to collapse, as the army preys upon itself to survive. Yet soon, the army will turn its cannibalistic impulses outward, reasserting Christian masculinity in opposition to the lesser enemy.

Fueled by the sustenance afforded by the semi-cannibalistic meals afforded by the horses, Richard then finds himself on his sickbed, near death:

    Ffor þe trauaylle off þe see,
    And strong eyr off þat cuntree,
    And vnkynde cold and hete,
    And mete and drynk þat is nouȝt sete
    To hys body, þat he þere ffonde,
    As he dede here in Yngelonde. (3043-48)

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62 See Heng, especially Chapter 2.
What emerges is a paradoxical understanding of sustenance; the cannibalistic actions of Christian knights devouring their own horses affords them the base levels of nutrition needed to maintain their battle prowess, and yet occupying the gustatory habits and physical location of the Saracen army reduces Richard to near-death. Christian warrior masculinity substantiates itself by reconfiguring what can be consumed; cannibalism becomes not only necessary, as with knights eating horses, but also desirable, as Richard soon learns of the delicacy of Saracen flesh when he is fed a pagan instead of pork. Certainly this episode resonates with militaristic discourse and community formation; the Saracen is reconfigured as base meat while the English become a nation defined by their arbitration of proper gustatory habits. As Heather Blurton describes, the romance “constructs English identity by means of the representation of the English king distinguishing himself from the French and German crusade leaders as an unrepentant, and very English, cannibal” (107, original emphasis). Yet beyond the reification of insular communal identity and othered enemy, this instance of cannibalism challenges gendered categories, as it is significant that Richard devours a male Saracen, resonating with rumors of Richard’s queer sexuality. Indeed, the romance reconfigures this aberrance as desirable, transforming Richard’s hybrid lineage into the image of English kingship, transforming subsequent acts of violence and aggression into images of proper masculinity, and finally, subsuming female agency beneath their ostensible absence.

The moment of literal cannibalism, as opposed to the more figurative cannibalism of the knights eating their horses, marks something of a turning point for the construction of gender in the romance. Whereas initially Richard’s masculinity is constructed in opposition to his fellow English, whether they are other soldiers or the two women, Richard’s direct encounter with

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63 See, for example, Burgwinkle, in which he argues that homosexuality was not contingent on a man performing stereotypically feminine gender roles, and that Richard’s aggressive masculinity does not necessarily equate to heterosexuality (73-85).
Saracens points to the construction of his masculinity in opposition to enemy combatants. It is a masculinity not constructed solely by knightly aggression, as demonstrated through his initial jousts with Moulton and Fulk Doly. Rather, it is a masculinity constructed by an aggressive cannibalistic impulse that should be considered monstrous or aberrant. Yet, those negative connotations become reconfigured as desirable for the pursuit of normative masculinity. Since Richard does not know initially that he is committing an act of cannibalism, his gusto in consuming what he believes to be spectacular pork comes across as rather ironic:

Before Kyng Rychard karf a knyȝte,
He eete fוףastere þan he karue myȝte.
Þe kyng eet þe fflesch, and gnew þe bones,
And drank wel afftyr, for þe nones. (3109-12)

While this account of Richard’s meat consumption sounds as if he were enjoying any delicious carnivorous feast, the clandestine substitution of Saracen flesh suggests that while Richard may not be cognizant of his cannibalism, his instinct is to enjoy such cannibalistic consumption; such violence, otherwise socially reprehensible, comes naturally to Richard and enables him to achieve the levels of aggression necessary to continue on his crusade.

While there is certainly the implication that the substitution of Saracen for pork reduces the Saracen warriors to non-human animals, I want to discuss the aspects of this consumption that do not allow for the conflation of Saracen and pork, the aspects that reify Richard’s aggression as cannibalism. These are the aspects that suggest Richard gazing upon the head of the young man whose flesh he ate is a mirror image; the Saracen becomes not only the necessary sustenance relegated to mere food, but also, more importantly, the mirror of the self. When Richard is presented with the head of the man whose flesh he has unknowingly consumed, he
falls to his knees and gasps as he regards the swarthy complexion, the black beard, the white teeth, the gruesome post-mortem grin of the lips—the ghastly piecemeal images certainly afford little dignity to the deceased man. Yet, Richard does acknowledge his consumption of literal Saracen flesh, and indeed, gleefully so:

What, is Sarezynys flesch þus good?
And neuere erst j nouȝt wyste?
By Goddes deþ and hys vpryste,
Schole we neuere dye for defawte,
Whyl we may in any assawte
Slee Sarezynys, þe flesch mowe take,
Seþen, and roste hem, and doo hem bake,
Gnawen here fflesch to þe bones. (3216-23)

Richard’s glee at reconfiguring the Saracen man and all of his comrades into food fit for English consumption is undeniable; he revels in the taste of the flesh and the variety of recipes for which Saracen meat could function. Yet his gruesome glee is predicated on his gaze at the human head. Before he can delight in configuring the men as pork, he must acknowledge their humanity; without such recognition, the defeat and consumption of the men would signify very little by way of military prowess. Thus, before Richard can laugh, he gazes upon the grinning lips of the Saracen corpse, regards “[h]ou hys lyppys grennyd wyde” (3213), and then, finally, he “gan to lauȝe as he were wood” (3215).

I do not mean to invalidate previous arguments for the textual relegation of Saracen human to mere food; rather, I wish to emphasize the need for the English, and in this moment Richard, to acknowledge the similarities between self and other before such a relegating move is
even necessary. To return to Girard, the most frightening aspect of any alleged foreigner is their refusal to be as different as the dominant group would like them to be. Like the sudden disappearances of both Cassiodorien and Margery from the romance, the idea of the English decimating the Saracen population is predicated on their very desirability. As the idea of an English empire depends upon the illusion of homogeneity, the process of building that empire necessitates continual encounter with difference.

The continual reconfiguration of other as something necessary to be contained somehow within the romance’s inner circles suggests how the illusions of dominance are founded upon desirable difference. Richard’s potential to be England’s foremost warrior is predicated upon his inheritance of his mother’s supernatural genes; with Cassiodorien as the literal embodiment of supernatural alterity eliminated from the narrative, Richard can contain and project her potential as something desirable for the future of England. After Margery facilitates Richard’s escape from her father Modred’s dungeons, Margery can quickly fade into the background of the narrative, allowing Richard to be portrayed as the real strength of the romance—despite, of course, his complete dependence on Margery for even the mere opportunity to escape—and gain his reputation as Lion-hearted. The Saracens then occupy the foremost location of alterity in the romance, as they are not only battle enemies, but also racial and religious others. Yet, the moment that Richard and the decapitated head of the Saracen man face each other in a twinned laugh suggests the real extent of their similarities; thus Richard and his English army can consume “food” fit for English stomachs precisely because of how very similar English and Saracen are. The images of Richard’s masculinity, then, depend on his ability to project alterity onto those around him, creating an illusion of domination and a legend fit for the mythology of English history.
The Roman de Silence is perhaps most famous for its allegorical debate featuring Nature and Nurture and their visions for the body of the eponymous protagonist. Indeed a ripe—and obvious—contender for a case study of the effects of nature and nurture on embodied gender, the Roman tells the story of the young Silence, assigned female at birth yet raised as a boy in order to circumvent King Evan’s ban on female inheritance. The arguments between Nature and Nurture provide fascinating insight into medieval concepts of gender and sexuality as well as their roles in the portrayal of dynastic structures. Throughout the romance, each argues exhaustively for her supremacy over the other, yet Silence wavers between siding with either; Silence at times finds the thought of realigning with Nature and living as female unconscionable, and at other times, finds the thought of remaining with Nurture and living as male shameful. Ultimately, Merlin, who just so happens to have been captured by Nature after his attempt to live off the grid in a beast-like fashion, reveals the alleged truth of Silence’s femininity, after which Nature works studiously to recuperate Silence’s body from Nurture’s masculinization; Silence thus is reinscribed quickly into the royal family as a model of worthy femininity. Nature, therefore, seems to trump Nurture, and Silence, now Silentia, takes her place as the trustworthy new wife of King Evan.64

However, the tension throughout the romance between Silence’s understanding of identity and other people’s expectations for Silence complicates the alleged binary opposition between Nature and Nurture, as well as the possibilities for Silence’s own gendered identity. I argue, then, that the importance of Silence’s gender be read in the context of its place among all

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64 Pronoun usage related to Silence necessitates a consideration of its gendered implications. I use binary gendered pronouns (he/him/his and she/her/hers) when the poem is clear in its presentation of Silence at that moment. I use the non-binary singular pronoun “they” (they/them/their) when the poem presents Silence more ambiguously.
the characters, not just per the desires of Nature and Nurture; indeed, all the characters, including the allegorical Nature and Nurture, displace their desires onto the body and identity of Silence. Nearly twenty years ago, *Arthuriana* released a ground-breaking special issue, edited by Regina Psaki, on the *Roman de Silence* that opened inquiry into such issues of gender and identity. Psaki notes that someday the *Roman* might become an important focus for such topics as child-rearing or minstrelsy, but that for now—in 1997, that is—“its staging of gender issues is riveting,” bringing readers to the unanswerable question of whether “this romance [is] ultimately misogynist or philogynous” (6). Ultimately, Psaki concludes “that no matter the approach, the center of attention remains stable: the fact that the knight is a woman” (6). In revisiting this fact twenty years later, it might become quickly apparent that even that supposedly factual center of attention does not remain stable; as multiple 1997 authors point out, Silence does not comfortably register as a woman, despite the *Roman’s* seemingly neat ending. Elizabeth Waterman concludes that “Silence is more than a female, less than a male; we need a term to describe her that is not dependent on these either/or models” (42). Robert L.A. Clark too asks, “What else might we see in the conflicted messages of *Le Roman de Silence* if we were willing to set aside assumptions about the main character’s identity as female, a move that feminist critics seem disinclined to make?” (53-54). Lorraine Kochanske Stock, in exhorting audiences to study the allotment of gendered power among all characters, and not just Silence, provides an important starting point for moving beyond limited perspectives for gendered possibilities. As Stock argues, the *Roman* “exposes how power is allocated to and appropriated by both genders” (7). Her argument, while focusing on a binary gender system, calls attention to the construction of gender as something performed socially; the significance of the gendered authority afforded to Silence must be read in the context of all the characters’ gendered authority.
My argument follows Stock’s theoretical approach in dismantling the primacy of a single character, moving beyond a reading of the *Roman* that privileges the alleged supremacy of Nature in considering embodied possibilities for gender. While the *Roman de Silence* certainly has not disappeared from critical attention altogether, there has been a relative paucity of reconsidering the possibilities for gender, especially given the rapidly shifting discourse about gender since 1997. Karen Lurkhur’s 2010 “Medieval Silence and Modern Transsexuality” is an exception, reading through modern discourse, largely from the 1990s, on transsexuality to show its resonance with the *Roman de Silence*. Yet the article concentrates largely on synthesizing discourse on modern transsexuality that essentializes sex assigned at birth, rather than reading and historicizing the possibilities for gender in the *Roman* itself. She rightfully points out that “[i]n the Middle Ages, by contrast, the idea of gender being in opposition to anatomy was much less fraught with anxiety” (224). However, while emulating or identifying with masculinity might have been more acceptable for people assigned the female sex at birth, Silence constantly needs to maneuver conflicting demands on the body.65 It is only when Nature reclaims her right to control over Silence’s body that the performance of masculinity is acceptable, as masculinity becomes a stand-in for Silence’s upstanding moral character rather than a potential identity. Yet Silence’s experiences underscore the importance of gender as an embodied experience, and not merely something coded through performed actions or used as a symbol of chaste restraint and honor; even in following such influential theorists as Judith Butler, I argue that the performed iterations of socially constructed gender still are experienced through the gendered body.66 Thus,

65 See Bullough’s influential article on transvestism in the Middle Ages. He argues that “the female who wore male clothes and adopted the role of the male would be trying to imitate the superior sex, to become more rational, while the man who wore women’s clothes, who tried to take on the gender attributes of the female, would be losing status, becoming less rational” (1383).

66 See, for example, Butler’s *Undoing Gender*, in which she writes, “If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or
I turn to queer, and more specifically, trans studies for the possibilities that Silence offers; reading through the *Roman* means recognizing the ambivalent position of both *being* human and being *viewed* as artifice. While studies of the *Roman* have moved beyond questions of gender alone, it is still an important locus of study for questions of gender, considering both how sharply these questions have veered away from binary essentialisms in the last twenty years and how much work remains to be done per Namaste’s push against the erasure of transgender subjectivity in critical methodologies. Indeed, Waters posits that Silence needs an identity that simultaneously acknowledges “the truth of her biological difference as a female” but also “empower[s] her to act outside the gender roles prescribed for her. One direction that this third path might lead is toward a valuation of cross-dressed, drag, or transgendered [sic] identities: queer identities” (37-38).

Given Silence’s complex interiority and the other characters’ conflicting demands for gender, I turn to the *Roman* for its presentation of a character who invites the audience to understand gendered performances both through interior character desires and through shifting demands from others. The dissonance between interior desire and external demand is one often experienced by people whose identities do not align with sex assigned at birth, and thus a transgender studies-based approach allows a reading of the *Roman* that approaches Silence not just as a symbol or plot catalyst, but as an autonomous subject viewed and used by the other characters as a symbol of and vehicle for their own desires. Considering the possibilities for Silence’s understanding of their own gender doesn’t necessarily mean disregarding arguments that take for granted the character’s innate femininity, and it also doesn’t mean anachronistically imposing a queer or transgender identity on a character who never identifies as such. Silence,
despite articulating their own gender, is figured constantly as a character subject to everyone else’s desires and ultimately is rendered legible when those desires become corporealized through her—now definitively female, according to Nature and court—bodily transformation at the close of the romance.

Yet image and reality are not always and assuredly consonant, as the difficulties of Silence’s gendered journey remind the audience. By the end, Silence might be King Evan’s perfect woman, silent and obedient, but this presentation of “natural femininity” is the result of the romance’s six thousand lines of terse debate, through the actions of Silence, the allegorical figures, and the supporting characters, in constructing normality and nature. Indeed, Lochrie has explored the irony of the idea of constructing and conflating the “natural” or normativity, arguing that Nature is often seen to give rise to the allegedly unnatural, thus distinguishing the terms from each other (*Heterosyncrasies* xxii). While Nature’s victory over Nurture presents Silence as wholly returned to a state of natural femininity, there seems to be nothing truly natural about the process; Silence’s femininity is just as much socially constructed by the efforts of the court as Silence’s masculinity, crafted by the parents and perfected by Silence. Silence’s transformations ultimately result in marriage, a conclusion that impacts the state of empire and lineage, but emphasizes more importantly her status as a married woman. King Evan’s initial proclamation that “no woman shall ever inherit again / in the kingdom of England / as long as [he] reign[s] over the land” shows that the future of the empire is indeed a concern, but it is a concern that functions more as episodic motivation than as an explicit concern for the remainder of the romance (314-16).67 By the end, of course, the king restores women’s right to inherit

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67 *Le Roman de Silence*, trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi which I will hereafter refer to as *RS*: [“Ja feme n’iert mais iretere / Ens el roiame s’Engletiere, / Por tant com j’aie a tenir tiere”] (314-16). It is important to note that Roche-Mahdi’s translation contains many errors and frequently flattens out possibilities for gendered ambiguity in the original Old French, instead opting for language that represents the most normative readings of gender. With the help of Dr.
because of Silence’s moral fortitude. However, Silence’s trustworthiness is presented as the exception to the general rule of women’s immorality. With Lochrie, then, Silence’s “natural” femininity and constancy is perverse according to the laws set forth by the narrator, who claims that such morality just doesn’t come naturally to women (6688-91).

If the romance’s engagement with the law banning female inheritance functions as a motivational factor rather than an explicit concern, then the presentation of “natural” gender cannot equate to gendered normativity. Rather, what the poem presents as Nature recovering her rights over Silence seems to be a function of rhetoric according to the laws of genre, not gender; the poem resolves the complications of the genre’s demands for the image of a “happy ending” by using gender assignment as a stand-in for character resolution. Indeed, Silence rarely acts in pursuit of their own desires, but instead responds to shame and the pursuit of preserving family honor, as Waters notes (38-43); the desires of their interior monologues rarely motivate action, as Silence’s character instead functions as a plot device revealing other people’s desires. Robert Sturges notes that Francophone culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries shows a marked surge in literature concerned with crossdressing in romance poetry, which perhaps informs the manipulation of Silence’s character. He proposes that the impacts of the relatively new system of primogeniture, disinheritng younger sons so that property might be passed on to the eldest, “created a crisis for the nobility in the category of class” (38). Following Garber’s contention that crossdressing is indicative of further incidences of category crisis, Sturges contends that “[t]he social disruptions and anxieties produced by the creation of this noble but poor class are … reflected in the proliferation of female, cross-dressing knights found in twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances” (39). Indeed, Silence’s body with its gendered social position

Sautman, I have noted wherever such translation errors hinder interpretations of the original language, and discussed possible interpretations in footnotes.

68 I am indebted to Karl Steel for his feedback on these ideas. Gender being a “rhetorical stance” is his phrase.
becomes the site upon which surrounding people displace their anxieties and their desires. Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr argue that “the romance narrative … goes to extraordinary and obvious lengths to underscore his passivity,” a passivity which, I argue, allows for this rendering of Silence as the blank slate for other characters’ desires (33).

While such a reading risks deflating Silence’s own presentation of gender, it is indeed important to remember, even while taking a transgender studies-based approach, the demands placed upon a person’s, or character’s, gendered body while they navigate the social world. This presentation and discussion of Silence’s passivity seems, then, to confirm Namaste’s contention that, by focusing on how embodiment symbolizes, much of queer theory erases transgender—or in Silence’s case, transgender-like—subjectivity. Rather than argue against Namaste, with whom I wholeheartedly agree, I consider the implications of Silence’s erasure alongside the possibilities for embodied subjectivity. I introduce the Roman as focused around the debate between Nature and Nurture, a decision which highlights the degree to which questions of “natural” gender, so to speak, focus on the allegorical characters themselves. The prominence of the characters and the vitriolic pathos of their arguments certainly demand a high level of attention, and yet their function as allegorical characters reminds readers to focus also on the ways that the presentation of nature and nurture—as phenomena and not just allegories—maps onto the other characters and plays out in the actions that drive the romance to its uneasy and sudden conclusion.

In considering specific textual moments and the progression of Silence’s gendered embodiment throughout the romance, I begin by comparing the first and final images of Silence. Initially silent because of infancy and silent at the close of the romance because of the

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69 Ruth Mazo-Karras and Linkinen usefully coin the term “transgender-like” to discuss people whose gender identity and presentation resemble contemporary transgender identities and also to call attention to the anachronism that would result from labeling a medieval character transgender without historicizing terminology.
expectation of docility from women, Silence, in these framing moments, is figured as a symbol of other characters’ desires rather than an autonomous person. Indeed, it is not until nearly 1700 lines into the romance that Silence is even conceived, and over 2000 until they are named. Silence’s late arrival and their very name suggests that the character functions, at least in the views of other characters, as an aporia in gendered society, a gap to be filled or a blank space which must be manipulated to become the appropriately constructed word. Silence’s parents, Cador and Eufemie, approach the difficulties of Silence’s literal gendered ambiguity by acknowledging and anticipating the manipulability of grammar, remarking that any issues that arise because of discovery of “his real nature” can be smoothed over merely by switching the name Silentius to Silentia:

And if by any chance

his real nature is discovered,

we shall change this –us to –a,

and she’ll be called Silentia.

If we deprive her of this -us,

we’ll be observing natural usage,

for this -us is contrary to nature,

but the other would be natural. (2076-72)

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70 RS: [“Avint si par le Deu plaisir / Que Eufemie ot conceü”] (1670-71).
71 RS: [“Sel faisons apierle Scilense / El non de Sainte Paciensce, / Por cho que silensce tolt ance”] (2067-69).
72 “Se nos li tolons dont cest –us / Nos li donrons natural us” would be better translated as: “If we seize away –us from this person, we will give him/her the natural usage.” The gender of the person whose name and natural usage is being debated remains ambiguous in the Old French; the assigned pronouns are a choice of the translator. Further, the verbs “to deprive” and “to observe” do not accurately reflect the forceful nature of the Old French verbs used by Silence’s parents. Therefore, the translation masks the parents’ anxieties about the importance of their child’s gendered existence.
This treatment of Silence’s name seems to suggest the easy manipulation of gender; the name, functioning as a synecdoche for overall social gender, can be changed at will in order to facilitate “natural usage” and the appropriate social customs according to the King’s inheritance laws. As Erin Labbie proposes, “Silence’s identity is not dependent upon the name; rather, the name changes in order to enable the public to categorize Silence ‘properly’ within its paradigmatic perception of sexual difference” (67). Indeed, the moments when the poem presents gender as something that can be switched with a name change and a clothing swap contrast with Silence’s lengthy internal struggles with the social demands of performing either a masculine or a feminine gender. The name might change the social reception of Silence, but it doesn’t dictate an easy identity exchange. Rather, it underscores the continual dissonance between Silence as a self-motivated character and Silence as a reflection of the desires of the other characters.

The final images of Silence return to the question of the grammar of gender raised during the naming process at the beginning of the romance, as the crowd gathered to witness the scene begins the process of making Silence a socially acceptable woman: “They dressed Silence as a woman. / […] / Once he was called Silentius: / they removed the –us, added an –a, / and so he was called Silentia” (6664-68). Nature then takes over, laboriously constructing femininity so that Silence can be married to the king, spending three days removing any trace of masculinity.

RS: [“Silence atornent come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroie plus? / Ain sot a non Scilensiüs: / Ostés est –us, mis i est –a / Si est només Scilentiä”](6664-68).

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74 The choice of the translator to use active voice in representing the verb constructions is misleading; a more accurate rendition of the Old French would be: “The –us is taken away, the –a is put in.” The use of the passive voice stands in stark distinction to Silence’s parents’ anxiety about the significance of naming; here, gendered naming is something that just happens, not something to be attributed to individual actions.

75 The verb “només” would be more appropriately translated as “named” rather than “called.” The idea of Silence being named either Silencia or Silencius emphasizes the power that those doing the naming have over Silence, thus functioning as a blank slate to be named by others.

76 RS: [“Silence atornent come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroie plus? / Ain sot a non Scilensiüs: / Ostés est –us, mis i est –a / Si est només Scilentiä”](6664-68).
from Silence’s body.\textsuperscript{77} The depictions of the easy manipulation of gender are purely external; the other characters re-dress—and redress—Silence, externalizing their ideas about how Silence’s gender should look and function.\textsuperscript{78} Nature, as an allegorical figure, reconstructs the physicality of gender, suggesting the romance’s overall suggestion that binary gender is biologically or essentially inherent and inevitable. Yet the final disjunction between the silent Silence and the clamorous efforts of the other characters suggests instead that binary gender does not have to be essential or inevitable; Silence, from beginning to end, is conceptualized not as a fully autonomous human with an essentialized gender, but as the blank slate on which the other characters write their desires.

These framing moments show how Silence, from beginning to end, is conceptualized not as a fully autonomous human with an essentialized gender, but as the blank slate on which the other characters write their desires. Indeed, the lengthy action preceding Silence’s conception and birth sets up many of the binarist crises catalyzed through the demands placed on the body of Silence, including honor and shame, speech and silence, and masculinity and femininity. Once Silence finally is conceived, the narrator rhapsodizes about Nature’s power in rendering Silence female, proclaiming that “it was a girl!,” and a “triumph of Nature’s art,” thus revealing the child’s assigned sex. However, while describing all of Nature’s powers in creating gendered bodies, the narrator pauses to remark that “[t]he body is mere sackcloth, / even if it’s made from

\textsuperscript{77} RS: [“D’illuec al tierc jor que Nature / Ot recovree sa droiture / Si prist Nature a repolir / Par tolt le cors et a tolir / Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. / Ainc n’i lassa nes point de halle: / Remariä luës en son vis / Assisement le roze al lis. / Li rois le prist a feme puis.”

\textsuperscript{78} In considering questions of Silence’s appearance, Michelle Bolduc analyzes the manuscript miniatures in the \textit{Roman de Silence}, concluding that “[i]f for much of the narrative Silence is a dynamic, active heroine, freed from the traditional roles accorded to women, her place in the images is limited. She appears in only five of the fourteen miniatures; moreover, she appears in these five as dependent and vulnerable; as an infant, a youth, a knight to a foreign king and a lascivious queen, or a woman, stripped naked. In the remaining images, Silence does not appear at all; at best, she is only the explicit or implicit subject of conversation” (110). While detailed analysis of the manuscript’s images is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note this material pattern, which parallels the poem’s depiction of Silence as a contradiction between an autonomous self and a subject constructed by the desires of others.
the finest clay” (1845-46). The comment is meant to emphasize the lack of nobility inherent in a corporeal body, as nobility and virtue are qualities of the heart, not necessarily the flesh. The tension between embodied gender and inner virtue certainly is one with which Silence must contend; while their inner virtue is consistently noble, their body is continually manipulated to reveal some alleged inner truth. The body might be “mere sackcloth” in terms of determining virtue, but for Silence, that sackcloth is a vital indicator of identity. The people surrounding Silence readily and easily manipulate how they read the markers that gender Silence, suggesting the simultaneous irrelevance and importance of the physical form; the body might not indicate any inherent nobility, but it consistently is assumed to indicate the alleged truth of gendered embodiment. Other characters read Silence’s male clothing as an easy indicator of masculinity and their body as an indicator of femininity, and yet Silence as an individual faces far greater turmoil in considering the boundaries and flexibility of self-identity and the gendered body.

The romance continually asserts the supremacy of Nature in undoing all the work of Nurture, thus seeming to suggest the supremacy of essential gender, or in other words, the idea that biology is destiny. Yet it takes about fifty lines to give an account of Nature’s formation of Silence at birth, as she painstakingly fashions her finest mold to give Silence beautiful curly hair, a perfectly hued and shaped face, slender and pale limbs, and all the physical traits that amount to Silence being gendered female (1904-57). The body might be “mere sackcloth” in comparison to the virtuous heart, yet it constantly is figured as essential to Silence’s character; Nature takes immense pride in her creation, and thus is infuriated that Silence is raised as male, and so she fumes:

There is nothing on this earth
created by Nature

79 RS: [“Li cors n’est mais fors sarpelliere, / Encor soit de la terre chiere.”]
that can be dis-natured in the long run.

My heart feels colder than ice,

I am so furious about the way

Nurture is disguising my creation.\textsuperscript{80} (2270-75)

While Nurture is, of course, an allegorical figure literalized and embodied by those who have socialized Silence, the use of Nature and Nurture as allegorical figures reveals the extent to which human decision governs what is perceived as being “natural” by birth or “nurtured” by social surroundings. Silence becomes the site of a fierce battle for dominance between Nature and Nurture, as Nature goes so far as to angrily exclaim, “If I don’t unmask her in the long run, / Nurture’s power will be proven / stronger than mine” (2292-94).\textsuperscript{81} Thus, even the allegorical figure of Nature knows that what is “natural” can become undone and must be defended to maintain the illusion of being natural.

Reading the actions of the characters surrounding Silence suggests, of course, far more about their own desires than their implications for Silence’s gendered embodiment. Turning directly to Silence, then, suggests the implications of Silence’s own desires. Despite Nature’s efforts to mold a girl and Nurture’s efforts to socialize a boy, “Silence wasn’t any more of a girl in a year” (2350).\textsuperscript{82} Importantly, Silence is depicted neither as male nor as female, but instead, as embodying the complicated ideas of gender projected by surrounding people. The narrator’s description of Silence’s innate qualities, while using masculine terminology to reflect Silence’s current social position, emphasizes self-awareness rather than a desire to please those surrounding people:

\textsuperscript{80} RS: [“Il n’a en tieure nule rien, / Ki par nature ait a durer, / Ki puist al loing desnaturer. / Le cuer ai plus froit que glaçon / Por maltalent de ma façon / Que Noreture me desguise”] (2270-75). The referent “me” of “desguise” is ambiguous, referring possibly to either Silence as Nature’s creation or Nature herself.

\textsuperscript{81} RS: [“Se jo a loing ne le seceuvre, / Dont puet plus certes Noreture / Que jo ne puissce”] (2292-94).

\textsuperscript{82} RS: [“Silence n’iert a an mais fille”] (2350).
[The governess] taught and instructed him very well.\textsuperscript{83} The child was not ungrateful;\textsuperscript{84} he was very glad of such learning – that was the effect of his good nature.\textsuperscript{85} The child’s innate qualities were such that he taught himself.\textsuperscript{86} (2381-86)

The overt message of the romance is that Silence, despite being raised as a boy, is an excellent candidate for lifting King Evan’s ban on female inheritance; far from being the fickle woman stereotypically discussed as leading men astray, Silence can, and will, become the perfect woman to match the perfect form given by Nature, ultimately both beautiful and silent. Yet beyond the misogynist implications of the romance suggesting that the best way to be a woman is to “be a man,” this particular moment in Silence’s childhood development suggests self-awareness and an innately self-referential construction of individuality, beyond Nurture’s demands to act like a man and Nature’s demands to be a woman.

Indeed, Silence remains self-contained with a sense of individuality beyond social demands, until the very moment when Nature confronts Silence:

‘…You have no business going off into the forest, jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows.

Desist from all of this!’ said Nature.

‘Go to a chamber and learn to sew!’

\textsuperscript{83} The Old French pronoun is ambiguous, referring either to a male or female child. Thus, the gendering of Silence is a choice of the translator, not the original text.

\textsuperscript{84} A more accurate translation would be that “The child does not disdain [the teachings of the governess].”

\textsuperscript{85} Silence’s “good nature” refers to a specifically aristocratic essence; class identity supersedes gender identity and allows for Silence’s “innate qualities” to help transcend the gendered constrictions of the situation.

\textsuperscript{86} RS: [“Moult bien le doctrine et ensegne. / Li enfès pas ne la desdegne, / Ainz est moult liés de l’apresure / Car cho li fait bone nature. / Li enfès est de tel orine / Que il meïsmes se doctrine”] (2381-86).
That’s what Nature’s usage wants of you!

You are not Scilentius!*87 (2525-30)

Again, while Nature is, of course, allegorical, such a depiction of Nature’s demands on Silence underscores how such stereotypically feminine traits do not come naturally to Silence; despite being alternately gendered as masculine or feminine, Silence’s only internalized and explicitly stated sense of self is, up until this point, a genderless obedience and love of learning. Self-awareness of the particularities of gender does not become important for Silence until the moment that stereotypical demands for gendered categories and behavior are forced into explicit consideration; indeed, in response to Nature’s charges that Silence is not the male Silentius, Silence replies:

‘I never heard that before!

Not Silentius? Who am I then?

Silentius is my name, I think,
or I am other than who I was.

But this I know well, upon my oath,
that I cannot be anyone else!

Therefore, I am Silentius,
as I see it, or I am no one.88 (2531-38)

Silence’s options are bleak; his self-knowledge reifies his comfort in a masculine gender role, albeit a role that is just now becoming self-consciously gendered. Yet to give up that new masculinity, as demanded by Nature, is to give up that sense of self. This sense of self is now

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87 RS: [“Ne dois pas en bos converser, / Lancier, ne traire, ne berser. / Tol toi de chi!’ cho dist Nature. / ‘Va en la cambre a la costure, / Cho violt de nature li us. / Tu nen es pas Scilentius!’"] (2525-30).
88 RS: [“Tel n’oï onques! / Silencius! qui sui jo donques? / Silencius ai non, jo cui, / U jo sui altres que ne fui. / Mais cho sai jo bien, par ma destre, / Que jo ne puis pas altres estre! / Donques sui jo Scilentius, / Cho m’est avis, u jo sui nus’"] (2531-38).
irrevocably gendered; while King Evan has already attempted to silence female autonomy by revoking women’s right to inherit, Silence now acknowledges that to give up social masculinity is to become no one.

Silence’s implicit recognition that femininity equates with social nothingness suggests a stark criticism of a social and essentialized binary gender system; it forces the consideration of how, like Silence’s very name, anything or anyone gendered not-male becomes rendered irrelevant. Simultaneously, Silence’s fear that if he is not Silentius then he does not know himself at all suggests the discord produced between conflicting ideas of self-identity and externally imposed identifiers. While this dissonance suggests that listening to self-identification is key to reading gender, Silence affords the readers no such self-identification. However, Silence’s internal struggles with conceptualizing a sense of a gendered self-identity resist the romance’s final image of Silence as a beautiful, and silent, woman destined for marriage.

While Silence’s male gender assignment is crafted initially as a response to King Evan’s ban on female inheritance, Silence becomes the placeholder for far more than simply evading the misogynist law. After being confronted by Nature about the alleged essentialism of gender, Silence responds with a reflection on his own gendered self-identity in an overtly sexualized monologue:

I was trying to make life easy for myself,
but I have a mouth too hard for kisses,
and arms too rough for embraces.
One could easily make a fool of me
in any game played under the covers,
for I’m a young man, not a girl.\footnote{There is a dropped logic in this quote, and the translation flattens out that ambiguity; “afoler” does not mean “to make a fool” of somebody, but rather, “to wound.” Thus, Silence is simultaneously too rough for kisses but also vulnerable to being wounded in bed.}

I don’t want to lose my high position;
I don’t want to exchange it for a lesser,
and I don’t want to prove my father a liar.\footnote{\textit{RŠ}: [“Gel pensai por moï aësier. / Trop dure boche ai por baisier, / Et rois bras por acoler. / On me poroit tost afoler / Al giu c’on fait desos gordine, / Car vallês sui et nient mescine. / Ne voel perdre ma grant honor, / Ne la voel cangiar a menor. / Ne vol mon pere desmentir”] (2645-53).} (2645-53)

Silence’s response certainly gestures toward the misogynist implications of a male gendered social role affording more honor and power than a female one. Yet his statement is not dependent entirely upon learning social codes; rather, Silence finds the very image of himself as female to be foolish, suggesting that Nature’s goal for Silence has become incompatible with his goals for his own future. Silence, of course, will be recuperated into the final image of perfect femininity, and so the romance does not pursue the possibility of disjuncture. Instead, Silence becomes reconstructed by the rest of the characters in the story to signify what they desire, rather than what Silence desires; the romance intimates the possibility of Silence’s self-definition but simultaneously frustrates possibilities of self-actualization.

Because of this simultaneous possibility and erasure of self, the romance suggests how Silence, regardless of self-definition, cannot function as an agentic individual. Rather, Silence’s claim that he is “a young man, not a girl” is subsumed beneath considerably more frequent comments from the narrator that Silence is simply a girl in disguise. Less than a dozen lines after Silence insists upon a male identity, the narrator laments that Silence is “a tender child / who had to force herself to live that way” (2661-66).\footnote{\textit{RŠ}: [“Jo ne di pas qu’il ne pe[n]sast / Diversement, et ne tensest / Diverse cogitation / Com enfant de tel natión, / Meësmement enfant si tendre. / Ki doit a tel usage entendre”] (2661-66). The Old French does not specify gender for Silence, discussing instead a child in neutral terms who has to learn to live without being tender.} The question of Silence’s identity thus cannot, and
should not, be easily resolved or defined; rather, it should be maintained that the ambiguities and irresolution that compose Silence’s identity are defined solely through others. Despite Silence’s claim to masculinity and Nature’s claim for Silence’s inherent femininity, Silence too remains unresolved:

He was always ready to go against
what his heart wanted him to do,
and whoever works against his will
finds himself often in a state of unhappiness.

Silence’s heart was divided against itself.\(^\text{92}\) (2677-81)

It is this irresolution that the romance uses to configure Silence as a mirror for the desires of other characters. All the other characters have clear definitions of Silence’s identity despite Silence’s own internalized ambiguities. Thus, Silence becomes increasingly fictionalized within the story itself, as characters project their own fantasies onto Silence.

While it is tempting to call Silence merely a symbolic scapegoat for everyone else’s fantasies and anxieties, I differentiate between Silence as a scapegoat and Silence as an essential part of the self. To an extent, those categories certainly overlap. Yet it is important to remember the contributions to queer theory from both Garber and Namaste. Namaste rightly points out the erasure of transgender subjectivity from much of queer theory, and allows us to read Silence for the ways that the other characters participate in this trend of erasing transgressively gendered subjectivity. Yet Silence is, ultimately, a character and not a human, and so following Garber in reading the ways that the character is presented as a trope points to the use and manipulation of Silence to reflect characters’ desires; Silence is, indeed, the “mireor du monde” who functions as

\[^{92}\text{RS [“Et tols jors erts a contraire / A cho que ses cuers voloit faire. / Et qui oeuvre contre voloir / Soventes fois l’estuet dolor. / Silences ot le cuer diviers.”]}\]
a rhetorical trope and not a full character. Alongside Garber, however, we must take seriously Namaste’s contention to resist the erasure of embodied subjectivity; while Silence is a literary figure and not an autonomous human, that character is read and manipulated by other characters to pursue their own desires. Silence, if viewed as essentially feminine because of assigned sex, becomes a scapegoat along with all other women to justify King Evan’s ban on female inheritance. Such a ban expels women from the realm of wielding autonomy, effectively literalizing the scapegoat comparison as the woman is expelled from society. Yet while Silence certainly functions as a scapegoat in some regards, constructed nearly entirely by others rather than allowed to function based on self-definition, Silence, unlike the scapegoat figure, is not expelled from society. Rather, Silence, as defined by others, is essential to the proper order of society: lords weep and tear their hair and beat their breasts while ladies wrench the rings off their fingers from wringing their hands so intensely, and Silence’s parents even faint from sorrow. When the chaos from the initial shock of Silence’s disappearance has dissipated, the parents send “a hundred men throughout the land / to find Silence and bring him back” (3007-08). Their sorrow also is more complex than mourning the disappearance of their child, as they lament that “He was the mirror of the world” (3063).

Simultaneously bearing the burden of everyone’s biases and expectations and being necessary to the wellness of those around him, Silence becomes the embodiment of desire essential for the image of a well-ordered society. In other words, Silence, whose self-definition relies upon ambiguity, continually is reconstructed by others into what they want to see, thus rendering that ambiguity not only a site of tension in

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93 RS [“Quant revienent de pasmison, / c. en sunt tramis par la tierre / Por celui cerkier et requierre.”]

94 RS [“Ki mireōïrs estoit del mont.”]
identity, but also the source of desire. With Silence’s ambiguity as the mirror of the world, people can reconfigure their expectations into something palatable for their own desires.95

One notable exception to this figuring of Silence as mirror of the world rather than autonomous self is his decision to pursue minstrelsy, motivated by his own conscience as he dismisses concerns about family judgment (2853-58).96 Silence claims that the journey is a way to avoid other people’s expectations and to pursue the skills necessary for potential knighthood, as his heart is depicted as asking him, “Why don’t you at least go abroad / to gain some experience and acquire some expertise?” (2849-50). Christopher Callahan goes so far as to argue that Silence’s pursuit of minstrelsy is a way to affirm both femininity and masculinity simultaneously:

[W]hen she sets off with the pair of itinerant minstrels and learns their trade, Silentia is affirming her dual gender rather than choosing one or the other. For by becoming a jongleur, she is able to step into a space where gender circularity is the norm, and where the tension between her public and private identity does not have to be resolved. Lyric, in Frederick Goldin’s now classic study (1967), is a discourse which defines maleness in female terms: the idealized female sung by men is a mirror which reflects men’s aspirations for perfection. (123)

While my reading of Silence does not equate public identity and private identity with, respectively, masculinity and femininity, Callahan’s argument is important for providing a way of navigating the dissonance of ambivalent gender performances and ambiguous identity. Indeed,

95 Kathy Krause discusses medieval connotations attached to literary mirrors, arguing that the mirror can connote idealism, vanity, or imperfection. See “‘Li Mireor du Monde’: Specularity in the Roman de Silence,” esp. pp. 86-87.
96 RS: [“Que dira donc li cuens tes pere? / Que devenra donques ta mere? / Que diront il quant le savront? / Que puet caloir? Bien te ravront, / Par si que Dex l’ait destine / Et que l’ait si determiné”] (2853-58).
it allows the suggestion that Silence, as a character, is unable, or indeed unwilling, to resolve the demands for a binarily gendered identity and performance, and must become someone else altogether; he disguises his face with herbs and attempts to appear “of low station” to anyone who might see him (2909-12).\(^97\) Thus, he exchanges his complexly gendered identity for a class identity. While the two are, of course, not mutually exclusive, his manipulation of people’s expectations for class identity allows him, temporarily, to step outside of expectations for gendered identity. While living as male, the main concern becomes the performance of the jongleur class, and the performance of masculinity is relegated to the background as the performance of servility takes precedence. With masculinity taking a back seat to minstrelsy, Silence can take on a role in which gender does not predetermine identity.

Importantly, this performance of servility means that Silence continues to serve as a mirror reflecting people’s desires back to them. Yet as Malduit, he exposes the worst of people’s desires; still a mirror of the world while pursuing his own desires, he reflects negative emotions and desires rather than inner virtue. Indeed, while the jongleurs traveling with Silence eventually end up hating him, the reason for their hatred is because of how very good a servant and musician Silence is; despite Silence’s loyalty, “they were tormented with jealousy, / despite that fact that all the money went to them” (3357-58).\(^98\) This reflection of negative emotions and desires extends even to the queen Eufeme; while she loves Silence for his beauty and trustworthiness, she eventually hates him because of that very trustworthiness when he refuses to have an affair with her; besides banking on stock misogynist assumptions such as the capricious nature of female emotions, the poem presents Eufeme as both loving and hating Silence because

\(^{97}\) RS: [“D’une herbe qu’ens el bos a prise / Desconoist sa face et deguise. / Ki bien l’esgarde viers le chiere / Bien sanble de povre riviere”] (2909-12).
\(^{98}\) RS: [“Envie les mort et tangone, / Por quant s’est lor, quanque on lor done’”] (3357-58).
of the goodness of his nature. Yet her speech to Silence focuses not on the actual goodness of his nature, but on how his appearance makes his trustworthiness obvious:

You looked like an innocent lad to me,

and, judging from your harmless appearance,

it seemed obvious to me, my friend,

that you were more trustworthy

than any other youth in this kingdom. (4010-11)

While this passage serves to reiterate Eufeme’s treachery, as she is attempting to lull Silence into a false sense of complacency through her praise, her words also call attention to the importance of appearance, both the physical appearance which attracts her to Silence and the trustworthiness that keeps Silence from responding. Both the jongleurs and Eufeme project their own insecurities onto Silence, suggesting how they are dependent upon the promise that the servant will remain servile; by reconfiguring Silence’s ambiguity into something desirable, they can maintain that illusory promise of control. Even the attempts by the jongleurs and Eufeme to kill Silence suggest their ultimate need to keep Silence within their control; the attempted murders not only backfire, but reveal their deceptive motives. Indeed, the only arguably successful plot to undo Silence comes from Merlin and the court at the very end of the romance. Both Eufeme’s and the jongleurs’ attempts to eradicate Silence reveal their own anxieties about how Silence’s presence

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99 Kathleen Blumreich posits that Eufeme’s ambivalent feelings for Silence reflect her own internal turmoil: “In Eufeme’s subconscious, Silence has taken on a more ominous role, being attributed a sexual deviancy which is actually a projection of the queen’s own lesbianism. Like one who shatters the mirror which reflects ugly reality, Eufeme urgently wants to destroy the object of her fear and desire” (56). While the argument assumes that Silence’s sex and gender both are female, Blumreich’s argument rightly calls attention to the queen’s projection of her own anxieties onto Silence.

100 RS: [“Jo si vos vi moult simple enfant / Et par vostre simple viaire / Qu’en vos ot gregnor loialté / Qu’en vallet de se roialté”] (4010-11). Most of the translation is misleading; Eufeme refers to Silence as a “very simple child,” not a “lad,” who is more loyal than all the men in the realm. She views him as an “enfant” whose loyalty and innocence puts him on par with the “vallet” of the realm; thus, Silence is marked by ambiguity in both age and gender, inflecting Eufeme’s desire.
reflects on them; Silence is a better servant and musician than the jongleurs and a more trustworthy individual than Eufeme.

The final plot development, the revelation and restoration of Silence’s “true” gendered destiny, enacts a similar reflection. While Nature revels in her success over Nurture, the people surrounding Silence are revealed to be as complicit in models of deception as the romance portrays Silence to be. Using the character of Merlin as a catalyst for the plot action, the battle between Nature and Nurture for control of Silence’s gendered destiny reaches its climax: Merlin, naturally human but living like a wild beast in the forest, smells and devours the roasting meat left for him as a trap to reawaken his human sensibilities. Nurture thus angrily laments:

How badly deceived are those
who condition people to do
what is contrary to their nature!

Whatever I work for and accomplish,

Nature deprives me of in one day!101 (5998-6002)

This episode of the “unmasking” of Merlin stands simultaneously in parallel and in contrast with the final “unmasking” of Silence. Nurture’s angry lament concedes superiority to Nature, and yet the very debate continues to call attention to the artificiality of both Nature and Nurture; the debate between Nature and Nurture specifically over the inherency of gender underscores the process of its social construction.

Nature’s victory in the debate over Merlin’s humanity versus wildness is decisive; despite the prolonged conversation between Nature and Nurture, Nature inevitably will reign victorious. Once Nurture concedes defeat, Merlin races toward the smell of roasting meat, as if it

101 RS: [“Com cil sont malement trahi / Ki noriscent la gent a faire / Cho que lor nature est contraire. / Quanque jo noris et labor / Me tolt Nature a un sol jor”] (5998-6002).
underscores the total impotence of Nurture. This episode seems to foreshadow the inevitability of Nature’s victory over Nurture in regards to Silence’s gender, and yet Merlin’s easy concession contrasts with Silence’s internal struggles; indeed, Silence laments, “I thought / to abandon woman’s ways forever, / but Eufeme has ruined any chance of that” (6458-60).

Merlin, in his subsequent accusation of Silence’s trickery, claims that “in truth, / he is a girl beneath his clothes. / Only the clothing is masculine” (6535-37). This accusatory revelation, however, juxtaposes the sexed body with the desire to abandon a biologically essential social role. While Merlin easily recovers humanity at the simple smell of roasting meat, racing to consume based on his instincts, Silence struggles with the idea of living as a female, as Silence’s previous engagements with Nature have suggested.

Until this point, a full reading of Silence has been best pursued by following both Namaste’s and Garber’s theories, which demonstrate how Silence both represents possibilities for gendered embodiment and is reduced to a two-dimensional character constantly used to reflect the desires and motivations of other characters. However, this final scene of revelation converts Silence into a purely externalized character, functioning solely as a social pawn; all of Silence’s previous concerns about preferring masculinity disappear, and instead, Silence is concerned solely with satisfying the social demands of the surrounding people. The king praises Silence’s loyalty and trustworthiness, then restores women’s rights to inherit as Silence becomes silent. The misogynist implications of this episode are clear; the best way to be a woman is to resist supposedly naturally feminine caprices and to emulate masculine virtue. Moreover, that admirable subjectivity necessitates servility and social utility. Silence, then, embodies both

102 RS: [“Folignier / Cuidai a tols jors us de feme. / Cho m’a tolt porchacié Eufeme”] (6458-60).
103 RS: [“…c’est vertés fine, / Si est desos les dras meschine. / La vesteüre, ele est de malle”] (6535-37). Again, the translation flattens out possibilities for ambiguity, as the Old French does not specify a gendered pronoun, but rather, notes that underneath his or her clothes is a girl. Only the clothing is of a male.
performative aspect of gender, and yet Nature’s subsequent reformation of Silence’s body, a laborious and time-consuming process, suggests that social gender is reified through the physical body:

They dressed Silence as a woman.

Lords, what more can I say?

Once he was called Silentius:

they removed the –us, added an –a,\textsuperscript{104}

and so he was called Silentia.

After Nature

had recovered her rights,

she spent the next three days refinishing

Silence’s entire body, removing every trace

of anything that being a man had left there.

She removed all traces of sunburn:

rose and lily were once again

joined in conjugal harmony on her face.

Then the king took her to wife.\textsuperscript{105} (6664-77)

Silence’s body, thus, is reformed linguistically, sartorially, and finally, corporeally. While the poem depicts these three processes as unified in reifying a female gender for Silence, the concentration on the external markers of gender suggest their flimsiness. In less abstract terms,

\textsuperscript{104} The translation renders the Old French in the active voice, yet it would be more accurately translated into the passive voice: “the -us was removed, an -a was added.” Thus, nobody is depicted as doing the work of the transition; it’s just something that happens.

\textsuperscript{105} RS: [“Silence atornement come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroie plus? / Ain sot a non Scilensiüs: / Ostês est –us, mis i est –a / Si est nomês Scilentîä. / D’îlluec al tiere jor que Nature / Ot recovree sa droiture / Si prist Nature a repolir / Par tolt le cors et a tolir / Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. / Aînc n’i lassa nes point de halle: / Remariä luês en son vis / Assisement le roze al lis. / Li rois le prist a feme puis”] (6664-77).
this final image of Silence’s gender reveals its quite literally social construction, as all the characters, except for Silence, make a woman out of Silentius. All of Silence’s internal monologues and struggles with thinking through the complexities of self-identity give way to purely external dialogue; gender, in this instance, becomes something performed not because of self-identity, but for the sake of social affirmation. Silence becomes silent as everyone else uses and reforms the body as they see fit.

This is not to say that gender itself is irrelevant or illusory; indeed, Silence’s struggles leading up to this final reconstruction of femininity would render false such an absolute claim. What this final image does suggest, I argue, is the desire for gender as a social contract. The final image of Silence as “naturally” female, rather than assert the supremacy of Nature, points to the social desire to portray gendered identity as something absolute. That portrait says far more about people’s desires for Silence and social positioning than it does about the inherency of gender; indeed, Nature’s hard work in reconstructing femininity culminates in the king taking Silence as his wife “on the advice of his / most loyal and trusted advisers” (6679-80). Silence has, by the end, become as allegorical as the figures of Nature and Nurture. While Silence’s body and social positioning had been a point of contention from the very beginning, the internal monologues and debates allow for a sense of Silence’s interiority and identity. By the end, it is impossible to read through Silence’s identity, as it has been, finally, coopted as a social pawn to catalyze female inheritance and ensure the continuation of the dynasty through marriage.

Ultimately, this image of gender as something that can be constructed, altered, and reconstructed suggests the desirability of Silence’s ambiguity. While the final image of Silence’s femininity overtly boasts of Nature’s superiority and the resolution of disordered gender, it simultaneously implies the insufficiency of a monolithic image of gendered hierarchies and

106 *RS*: [“Par loëment de ses princhiers, / Qu’il plus ama et plus tint ciers”] (6679-80).
categories. The process of reconstructing Silence’s gender as female points to the desire for the image of essentialized gender; however, the process of presenting that image of essentialized gender develops from its previous ambiguity, a sense of flexibility that allows for the construction of an image. Thus, I argue that it is not Silence’s gender that is the most important question for reading the romance; rather, as with the question of gender in general, we must consider the desires and anxieties that are displaced onto other bodies, the processes that we undergo to resolve individuals within categories rather than rethink the categories themselves. For Silence’s story, gender is neither irrelevant nor illusory, but it is part of a social process, and it is constructed according to the social desires and fantasies of the surrounding characters.
Chapter Three – The Life of Saint Eugenia: Beyond Gender in the *Legenda aurea*

*Reading through “Cross-Dressing” Hagiographies*

The idea of people dressing in clothing assigned to the so-called opposite sex is one that calls to the popular imagination such images as Buffalo Bill in the famed scene of *Silence of the Lambs*, or perhaps Divine in a wide array of John Waters’ films, often registering a discomfort that can be attributed, at the best, to a privileging of binary cis genders, and at the worst, outright transphobia—although, of course, there is a good argument to be made that these are overlapping categories. Notably, those figures under scrutiny tend to be assigned male at birth; while certainly not impossible, instances of people assigned female at birth who occupy and perform non-binary or masculine genders are far less frequently subject to the same scrutiny. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna attribute this phenomenon to a general social privileging of masculine traits as they bracket people into either male or female gender assignments (esp. 1-20). Indeed, while Kessler and McKenna published their study in 1978 and utilize now-outdated terminology and concepts of gender, the phenomenon of privileging masculinity certainly remains true, and indeed seems to have been prevalent in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the so-called “cross-dressing” saints, generally described as women dressed and living as monks. Yet as I argue, versions of Eugenia’s tale suggest possibilities for gender that extend beyond these conceptions of binary male and female gender roles, allowing Eugenia to be, at times, Brother Eugene and not just Eugenia-dressed-as-Eugene. Although, ultimately, Eugene returns to life as Eugenia, the narrative intimates possibilities of corporeal transformation and exposes the malleability of social gender.
Eugenia, or Brother Eugene is, in some ways, very much like the other “cross-dressing” saints, such as Euphrosyne (or Smaragdus, or Esmerade) and Marina (or Marinos); assigned female at birth and raised as a woman, Eugenia seeks closer proximity to God and an escape from a pagan family and the impending doom of marriage to a man by donning male clothing and assuming the life of a monk in a monastery. Unlike the other saints’ legendaries, however, Eugenia’s story includes a version in which the gendered transformation is complete; now speaking as Brother Eugene, he says that he does not just occupy male clothing and social roles, but truly has become a man. While not all versions of the legend include this specific corporeal transformation, Eugenia’s gendered embodiment, presentation, and performance as well as the reception of Eugenia by those surrounding characters provide evidence of the range of ambiguities and nuances that a gendered subject could occupy and command. First and foremost, this chapter’s main concerns are not necessarily the genre of hagiography itself, but instead what the hagiographical can contribute to gender studies. The cross-dressing saints are an obvious locus of study for issues of gender, but given the rapidly shifting discourse around gender itself in the last few decades and the relative lack of critical attention to hagiographies since then, I consider how more recent concepts of and discourse surrounding gender might equip us to read the saints’ lives differently. Most importantly, I read through how Eugenia’s legendary resonates with contemporary transgender studies, even from her firmly historicized location in Christian antiquity.

Vern Bullough, in his classic sociological study “Transvestites in the Middle Ages,” identifies the general tendency in the Christian West to shun men allegedly debasing their “superior” forms to occupy the roles of women; the only thinkable reason for men to dress in female garb would have been for purposes of illicit sexual contact (esp. 1383-85). Women,
however, could have been lauded for wearing male attire, as it would have been only natural for people to strive toward the perfection embodied by masculinity. Of course, someone like Joan of Arc was punished for having gone too far—not only for meeting men on the battlefields as their equal, but even more so for dressing in fancy male clothing and wearing her hair in fashionable male styles. Thus, her actions would implicitly suggest the inadequacy of essentialist gendered categories. Beginning with this general framework of acceptable models of transvestism, a discussion of the so-called “cross-dressing” saints quickly points to the inadequacy not only of an essentialist model but also of a binary model in which people perform either masculinity or femininity. For the cross-dressing saints, masculinity and femininity largely become divorced from the body, as spirituality instead takes precedent for signifying identity. And yet the body does not disappear or become void of all meaning; rather, as I argue in this chapter, a full discussion of the possibilities for the ways that hagiographers imagined and presented the genders and bodies of these so-called cross-dressed saints must account for the moments in which the very term “cross-dressed” fails to provide adequate description. Indeed, Eugenia has certain versions of her legend that seem to suggest her gender transformation upon entering the monastery goes beyond both the spiritual and sartorial.

Bullough begins his article by defining “transvestism” as “the desire to dress in the clothes and even assume the role of the opposite sex” (1381). This term has, of course, become more nuanced since the publication of his article in 1974. There has been an immense growth of gender studies in the decades following his research, including foundational work on transvestism by Marjorie Garber. As I discuss in this dissertation’s introductory chapter, Garber ventures the claim that “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male or female, but
the crisis of category itself” (17, original italics). In examining what those category crises might be, she encourages us to learn by looking at the transvestite figure. Certainly Eugenia’s legendary provides a broad range of insights into the possibilities for transvestic resonance in her sociological context. Yet as influential and important as Garber’s work has proven to be, studying the possibilities for gendered embodiment, particularly in those moments where Eugenia is represented not just as a rhetorical trope but also more fully as an autonomous and critically thinking subject, requires more than merely looking at the transvestite figure. As Namaste observes, Garber’s critical approach implies that “the transvestite is an effect of performance and nothing else, … a mere tropological figure” (189). It is important, then, to consider both Garber’s and Namaste’s arguments in a discussion of these “cross-dressed” saints; the hagiographies often do portray saints as tropological figures designed to exemplify and embody spiritual ideals for didactic purposes. Yet they do not only present the saints for their symbolic value, and so it is important also to consider particular moments in which the saints point to “the conceptualization of transvestite identity as real, lived, viable experience” (Namaste 189).

These legends of women dressed and living as monks, often to escape arranged marriages and seek greater spiritual proximity to God within the walls of a monastery, might have provoked anxiety about the blurring of gendered distinctions, much in the same way that Garber discusses the phenomenon of a category crisis. However, these legends, many of which share remarkable similarities, uniformly laud the saints’ actions on the basis of their superior spirituality. Indeed, even fourth-century resident misogynist Saint Jerome writes that “she who wishes to serve Christ more than the world … will cease to be a woman and will be called man” (qtd. Garber 214). Alternately, many of the saints who live temporarily as men and then resume
female monastic roles live the remainder of their lives betrothed to Jesus, thus becoming Brides of Christ. The misogynist implications of such models of female spirituality are readily apparent: even when women claim autonomy over their own futures and bodies, the best way for them to be their own women is to become more and more like men. Becoming a Bride of Christ, undeniably a female role and potentially a source of autonomy, also had its own misogynist implications; as Dyan Elliot points out, the identification of virgins as brides of Christ can be traced back to Tertullian “in an effort to impose some kind of discipline on the independent virgins of Carthage, who perceived themselves as living the genderless, angelic life” (3).

I do not mean to argue against the reality of those implications, nor do I mean to shut down interpretation beyond the general patterns I have described. Rather, I propose that even within these proscriptive roles for female sanctity and sexuality, far more nuanced opportunities for the creative exercise of gender and spiritual identity exist, as Eugenia’s example will testify. The cross-dressed saint achieves sanctity through occupying a liminal position of ambiguity: at times, an effeminately beautiful young man, at other times, a genderless or alternatively gendered eunuch. The importance of gender is revealed, in these narratives, both by individual identity and by the perceptions constructed by social contract. This dual nature of gender manifests, then, a dissonance between identity and perception. While figures such as Hildegund of Schönau and Joan of Arc provide fascinating historical evidence of what the daily experiences of these cross-dressed saints might have resembled, the hagiographies themselves are often thought to be more literary and fictionalized, bearing strong overlaps with the idealization of the romance genre; both present their characters as ideals to be imitated.107

107 See, for example, Valerie Hotchkiss’s Clothes Make the Man, in which she discusses the roles of clothing and identity for both the historical figures of Hildegard of Schönau and Joan of Arc as well as for the hagiographical cross-dressed saints.
In terms of hagiography as a genre with its own set of stock ideals, Mary Ann Stouck claims that it is often viewed as monotonous and generic, criticized for “its self-conscious conventionality,” warranting the common complaint that “Once you’ve read one saint’s life, you’ve read them all” (xvii). Indeed, in positing an ideal model of female spirituality, the hagiographies certainly do overlap significantly with each other. Hermann Usener argues, using the example of Pelagia, that these cross-dressed saints developed as reproduced relics of the hermaphroditic Aphrodite of Cyprus (210-15). Evelyne Patlagean argues that they developed from the tenets of Gnostic salvation, which stressed androgynous ideals (600-04). While critics currently remain unresolved on the definitive origins of these hagiographies, having similar roots would account for overlap both in terms of story episodes and in presented ideals.

Yet Stouck follows up her reflection on the general reception of the hagiographies as uniform and monotonous with an account of her own fascination with the nuanced and exciting differences between them, noting that even “[i]f the genre was conventional, the conventions were constantly under pressure for renewal as ideals of sanctity changed” (xviii). Far more recently, E. Gordon Whatley writes that “the new martyr legends of the fifth and sixth centuries are now recognized as contributing significantly to the construction of late Roman Christian identities by dramatizing issues and conflicts and supporting or undermining various agendas current from the fourth to sixth centuries” (“Retelling” 161). Elsewhere, he writes more generally about the shifting perceptions of the genre; moving away from Delehaye’s early low opinion of most hagiographical texts, Whatley claims that the “typical ‘dossier’ of an early Christian or medieval saint exemplifies, as clearly as any other documentary matrix, Cerquiglini’s ‘écriture de variance’, McGann’s ‘social text’, and the limitations of the traditional idea of authorship” (“Textual Hybrids” 32). I also argue against a claim that would render the
hagiographies of these cross-dressed saints interchangeable or overly generic, given both shifting demands for hagiographical conventions and the implicit biases and agendas of different hagiographers and audiences. While it would be well beyond the scope of this chapter to track all of the variations between different versions of different legends and to attempt to account for the implications of those differences, I discuss the case of Saint Eugenia; in addition to the saint’s self-presentation, the interactions between the saint and various other characters suggest the ways in which the legendary presents varied possibilities for presentations and perceptions of embodiment and gender performance.

The Reincarnations of Eugenia

While there are many different versions of stories telling Eugenia’s legend, this chapter first will consider Jacobus de Voragine’s thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* in the context of the overall legendary; indeed, almost one thousand manuscripts of the *Legenda* alone are extant as well as five hundred more manuscripts with vernacular translations. As I will discuss more fully, Jacobus’s *Legenda* was endorsed and circulated by the newly formed Dominican Order, used largely in response to heresies plaguing the doctrinal dominance of the Church. Given the context of these heresies, Jacobus’s subtle shifts and thrifty compressions in his versions of the hagiographies, including that of the so-called transvestite saint Eugenia’s life, can suggest important thirteenth-century Church concepts of the limitations as well as flexibilities of sex and gender boundaries. In addition to its initial concentration on Jacobus’s variations, this chapter also will consider how the earlier instantiations of Eugenia’s legend suggest flexible gendered categories and possibilities for identity. Indeed, if Jacobus’s orthodox version of Eugenia’s legend shuts down possibilities for a variety of gendered identities, as I will argue, then the
earlier versions could have had the potential for non-binary and non-orthodox understandings of gender, thus warranting the ensuing suppression.

Ultimately, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to determine the chronology of the versions of Eugenia’s legend.\textsuperscript{108} Much work in the field of hagiography remains to be done in tracing Jacobus’ source material, as William Granger Ryan notes.\textsuperscript{109} More recently, Eamon Duffy notes that Jacobus drew widely from Jean de Mailly’s late-1220s \textit{Abbreviatio in gestis et miraculis sanctorum} and Bartholomew of Trent’s mid-1240s \textit{Epilogus in gesta sanctorum}. Despite the popularity of Jean’s and Bartholomew’s books, they now survive in a couple of dozen manuscripts each (Duffy xi). With no extant editions of Jean’s and Bartholomew’s books, it is difficult to assess which changes Jacobus made directly from his source material. However, in considering the sheer proliferation of the versions and the uncertain chronology, I hope to show how the \textit{Legenda}’s continual reproduction in different versions makes their differences so significant, intervening, ultimately, in conversations about the possibilities for imagining non-normative genders. While the legends of the transvestite saints have their roots, as much hagiography does, in Byzantine and other Eastern sources in Late Antiquity and the very early Middles Ages, the popularity of their stories burgeons throughout the centuries.

Eugenia’s legend has three initial versions upon which subsequent versions are modeled: an Armenian version included in \textit{The Apology and Acts of Apollonius, and other Monuments of Early Christianity}, a Latin version in Rosweyde’s \textit{Vitae Patrum}, and a Greek version in the tenth-century Symeon Metaphrastes’ \textit{Lives of Saints} (Bonner 253-64). As Whatley notes, the Bollandists categorize two main versions of the passio: Passio Ia (BHL 2666), which is the

\textsuperscript{108} For a detailed examination of the textual hybridity and chronology of Eugenia’s legendary, see E. Gordon Whatley’s “Textual Hybrids in the Transmission of the ‘Passio S. Eugeniae’ (BHL 2666, 2667).”
\textsuperscript{109} Ryan writes that “while scholars have in recent years turned their attention to Jacobus’s work, much remains to be done on the Legend—for example, to establish a textus receptus by collating the manuscript material, to locate Jacobus’s quotations from other authors, and to evaluate the use he made of his sources” (xiv).
version published by Rosweyde, and Passio Ib (BHL 2667), printed in Mombritius’s fifteenth-century *Sanctuarium*. Delehaye determined that Ib actually is earlier, and asserts that the Greek versions and their Syrian and non-Western derivatives used the Latin texts as sources. Whatley notes that Delehaye “asserts, rather than demonstrates, the priority of the Latin versions over the eastern versions, but his instinct is certainly justified by the evidence of verbatim quotations in the [Latin texts] from, e.g. Rufinus’ *Historia monachorum* (as often noted), and from other authors quoted … such as Pelagius, Proba, and Cyprian of Carthage” (“Textual Hybrids” 33 n.7).  

In addition to these main families of legendary versions, there are many variations too numerous to describe in their entirety. However, a brief sketch of several adaptations will serve not as exemplars of the remainder, but as examples of the myriad ways that Eugenia’s life has been imagined and altered. An Old English version, likely modeled on the Latin as recorded in the *Vitae Patrum*, has been attributed to Ælfric. A Syro-Antiochene version based on the Greek edition has been dated to the eighth-century and attributed to John the Recluse of Beth-Mari-Kaddisha in Qanün. A variation of the Greek version of the legend, the Menologion of Basil II (Cod. Vat. Graec. 1613, p. 270), “offers nothing new except the statement that Eugenia declared herself a eunuch when she entered the monastery” (Bonner 255 n.3). Campbell Bonner remarks that while Symeon’s account is the fullest on account of its rhetorical passages and

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110 See Whatley, “Textual Hybrids,” 32-33 for his full discussion of the legend’s chronology.

111 Agnes Smith Lewis in 1900 ascribes the tales some literary value and recognizes their importance to monks, and yet concludes that they are far inferior to the Gospel texts underlying them on the palimpsestic text. Her descriptions, while outdated in terms of its dismissal of the hagiographies, point to a traditional attitude toward the genre: “These stories were so valued in the eighth century that a monk named John the Recluse or the Stylite, of Beth-Mari-Kaddisha, near Qanün, in a monastery near to the town of Kaukab of Antioch, being in want of vellum, sacrificed for their sake that fourth century text of the Holy Gospels which the Biblical critics of the modern day hold in highest esteem…Although these ‘Select Narratives’ cannot pretend to much value when compared with the ancient Gospel-text which underlies them, and which has been preserved for their sakes alone during eleven centuries, and though it would be a difficult task to sift the few grains of historical truth which they contain from their bushels of imaginative chaff, they are not without some literary beauty. Piously believed in at the time they were written, they exhibit just such a mingling of exciting adventure with godly precepts, as would make them a favorite means of edification to the monks of the Middle Ages” (v-vi).
commentaries, it “adds nothing of value to the substance of the Latin version, which is rightfully held to be the older” (255). While it may be true that the Greek version does not add any significant plot points to the older Latin version, it would be an oversight to dismiss Symeon’s additional rhetorical passages and commentaries as worthless; rather, they add significant details in terms of characters’ motivations and interior ruminations. While the major plot points of the versions do not diverge from each other in any significant ways, Bonner does point out one noticeable detail from the Armenian version altered in the Latin and Greek versions: while the Armenian version makes reference to Eugenia’s direct imitation of St. Thecla, the remaining versions omit those references, an omission that F. C. Conybeare attributes to Thecla having become “a somewhat heretical saint” (147-48). On the chronological inconsistencies of the latter half of the tale, specifically, those elements whose temporal markers are historically impossible, Conybeare concludes that the events of the latter portion of the tale, after the trial of Eugenia, must have happened in the first half of the third century. A later recension in 280 A.D. connected the martyrdom scenes to the persecution of Decius to link an already-known saint with the horrors of a more contemporary event, thus making the tale more immediately relevant to Christians (Conybeare 149-52). Regardless of past scholarly approaches to hagiographical chronology, Whatley argues that the legend was composed originally in response to the historical cults of the martyrs Protus and Hyacinthus (“Female Joseph” 89-90).

There is clearly an enormous body of material to consider in developing a full discussion of how all the saints, and indeed even Eugenia alone, have been imagined and presented in various versions of the legends. In considering the possibilities for these imagined genders, it is important to note that the idea that gender within the church is more complex and multiple than a binary system allows is already well-established. For example, JoAnn McNamara concludes that
“the Christian gender system continued to rest on contradictory premises. It succeeded only in reproducing the single-gender system that worked so well socially as long as women were safely excluded from it” (17). While Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century used the Aristotelian continuum to disqualify women from the clergy, alleging that the natural inferiority of women as imperfect men rendered them subordinate, McNamara argues that “concealed and cloistered, virile women remained potentially superior on the continuum or in command of their own virtues in a system of alterity. The syllogism was never resolved and its unsteady foundation continues to undermine the gender structures built upon it” (17). The cases of the cross-dressed saints continue to point to the limitations of this binary gender syllogism, as the tales depict women, supposedly inferior in sex and sanctity, embodying masculine virtue far better than the men surrounding them.\footnote{As Sherry Reames argues, the most prevalent images of sanctity in Late Antiquity were masculine. See Middle English Legends of Women Saints.}

I want to consider, then, how the character of Eugenia in specific versions contributes to unsettling preconceptions of a binary Christian gender system. To summarize the overall trajectory of Eugenia’s story, which varies in its details from version to version, Eugenia is introduced as a beautiful and brilliant teenage daughter of a pagan Roman consul. In some versions, she is drawn to Christianity through reading about Saint Thekla. In all versions, her natural intelligence plus her attraction to the Christian music she overhears leads her to desire conversion. Aided by her eunuchs, she escapes her family disguised as a man and enters a monastery, where she eventually is charged with raping a woman named Melantia, who is angry at having been rejected romantically and sexually by Eugenia.\footnote{This episode is based on the ancient folktale of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, originally from Gen. 39:7-23 and mediated through Hellenistic Tradition. See, for example, Whatley’s comparison of Eugenia’s legend with the folktale in “More Than A Female Joseph,” 98-102 and “Eugenia Before Ælfric,” 351 n. 8.} Brought to trial before a consul who happens to be her father, she reveals her breast as proof both of her femininity and of her
innocence. All charges against her are cleared while Melantia’s house and belongings, and in some versions Melantia herself, are burned up by the divine fires of retribution. Stunned by her spiritual devotion, her family and many onlookers convert to Christianity, thus provoking the anger of the pagan government, which eventually orders them all killed.

The frequency with which the saints are accused of raping or seducing young women points to their association with sexual illegitimacy, even though the charges against them eventually are cleared, either during court trials or after their deaths; in other words, it is only when the surrounding characters have found the alleged evidence that the saint is, in fact, female that the saint is no longer suspected of being a sexual threat, a suspicion that does not extend to the decidedly male monks but only to the ambiguously gendered saint. Less frequently, but still significantly, the saints become the objects of male desire as well, as is the case with Euphrosine, living in a monastery under the name Esmerade; while Euphrosine-Esmerade’s tale does is not the focus of this chapter, a brief comment on a particular episode of her legend provides important overall context for Eugenia’s life. Euphrosine, disguised as the eunuch monk Esmerade, attracts the sexual attention of the male monks amongst whom she lives, and she is thus ordered secluded from the rest of the men to prevent any temptation on their part. Allen Frantzen argues that the cross-dressed saints always are juxtaposed with the properly masculine “real” men of the story to show how, despite masculine virtue, the saint in question is “nothing like a ‘real’ man.” While Frantzen comments that the charges of homosexual desire are precluded by the fact that the object of the monks’ desires is actually a beautiful woman (qtd. in Gaunt 163), Simon Gaunt rightfully insists that these monks are attracted not to a woman, but to a person they perceive either as masculine or as a eunuch and thus “forces us (and the monks, when they discover her sex) to question what is meant by the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’”
While there is no such episode in Eugenia’s account, there are still hints of desire for the saint as ambiguous. Eugenia’s proximity to her eunuchs as well as her self-proclaimed identity as having become a man suggests that she, like Euphrosine-Esmerade, undoes the legitimacy of a system in which masculine and feminine, as either gendered behaviors or spiritual models, can be posited as mutually exclusive.

_Eugenia and the Heretics_

Given the overall outline of Eugenia’s tale as well as the background context of the dangerous sexuality of the so-called transvestite saints, I move to consider Jacobus’s version of Eugenia’s legend, particularly how the religious and political climate of his moment affects his manipulation of the source material. His retelling represents the tale in its barest form; Jacques LeGoff attributes this pithiness to the _Legenda’s_ inclusion in the newly developing subgenre of the “abbreviated legendary,” designed to move quickly through narration and avoid boring an audience in an age much concerned with combating heresy (6). However, the _Legenda’s_ compression of narration cannot be attributed solely to a desire for brevity; as LeGoff points out, medieval prologues announce the intention of a work, and Jacobus’s prologue “does not speak of _brevitas_, of _utilitas_, or of _facultus praedicandi_. In fact, he does not aim at practical specialization for his work, but rather conceives of it in a universal perspective, combining the history of salvation, liturgical history, and saints’ lives” (14). Indeed, LeGoff argues that the _Legenda_ was designed as a _summa_ on liturgical time, part of a turn toward celebrating saints for their lives rather than marking their memories with cults oriented around dates of martyrdom (24-25). This moves away from Peter Brown’s foundational description of the cult of the saints as being about “the joining of Heaven and Earth, and the role, in this joining, of dead human beings” (1).
Therefore, the *Legenda* was not simply a sourcebook for sermons but was also a representation of Jacobus’s interpretations of saintliness, morality, and temporality in the face of allegedly rampant heresy.

Indeed, Eugenia, for all the transgressive potential in her legend, is represented as an exemplar of morality, chastity, and devotion. In retaining none of the lengthy rhetorical and didactic passages of the Greek and Armenian passages, compressing even plot details of the more straightforward Latin version from which Jacobus translated, Eugenia’s life in the *Legenda aurea* represents an important view into the complexities of gender in her overall corpus of legends. As I have argued above, given the corpus of the saint’s overall legendary, Jacobus’s Dominican-sanctioned barebones version of her life can give insight into the autonomous and, at times, transgressive potential for gender that becomes suppressed in the fight against heresy.

Sherry Reames has shown that the *Legenda* was meant to be used as a sourcebook for a clerical audience in its efforts to “reverse the drift toward modern, secular values that had already become evident in urban Italy” (133). Reames’s conflation of “modern” and “secular” certainly is outdated, and yet it still seems likely that the book represented not just source material for the clergy but also Jacobus’s overall interpretation of Dominican theology, as LeGoff much more recently argues. The *Legenda*, in comparison to other compendia with similar goals, was “used by educated Dominican churchmen as a weapon against heretical and lay challenges to the authority of the thirteenth century Church” (Maddocks 2). The version’s popularity can be attested by the one thousand surviving manuscript copies as well as its proliferation in Latin and numerous vernaculars as incunabula after the invention of printing.

Eamon Duffy notes that the popularity of the *Legenda* quickly extended beyond only Dominican

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114 Reames’ work on the *Legenda*, while foundational, often uses now-outdated language. However, it is overall still regarded as valuable. See, for example, Eamon Duffy’s introduction to the 2012 edition of *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. 
networks, even in Jacobus’s lifetime, and that by the 1280s, it was influencing hagiographical projects even outside of Italy, including the South English Legendary. Given the specific challenges to the authority of the thirteenth century Church, it makes sense for Jacobus de Voragine’s version greatly to downplay the implications of Eugenia’s transformations beyond the mere sartorial to gendered bodies and identities. While Jacobus of course would have had to compress the detail and rhetoric of an individual legend in order to fit it into a compendium version meant to function as source material for sermons, the alteration and suppression of particular details also would help bolster a Church campaign to reify its own doctrinal authority.

While the Church was arming itself against the perceived threats of heresies, the origin and even the existence of the Cathar heresy is debated widely. As Mark Gregory Pegg points out, the origin of the word Cathari itself is questionable, as is its generalized application to different communities from southwestern Languedoc to northern Italy (Corruption 17). Pegg quotes Paul Alphandéry in approaching what can be said about the practice of various heresies in the Middle Ages: it was exceedingly difficult “to form any precise idea of the Albigensian doctrines, as our knowledge of them is derived from their opponents” (qtd. 19). However, this bias in scholarly approaches to heresy helps construct an understanding of medieval perceptions of various heresies by their opponents. This does not mean that perceptions of heresies were altogether false, but rather that they are skewed through the biases of the opponent, grouped together under the imperfect label of ‘Cathar’ when there would have been many local groups

116 See, for example, Pegg’s “The Paradigm of Catharism; or, the Historians’ Illusion,” which promotes skepticism about the existence of the Cathar church, arguing that the idea was constructed by the persecution of the Church. Other skeptics include Moore, whose “Principles at Stake” revisits discussion from a conference on Catharism; he accepts the existence of dualism in thirteenth-century Italy but finds evidence for the twelfth century to be lacking. This work follows his 2012 book, The War on Heresy, which argues that Cathars and Catharism were constructed and that the radical views that they were thought to hold were rumors and myths. Julien Théry-Astruc’s “The Heretical Dissidence” claims that followers of dualist belief in the Albi region were mainly opposed to authoritative Church rule.
with varying ideas classified as heretical. As Chris Sparks describes Pegg’s work, “historians studying ‘Catharism’ – a term he rejects as anachronistic – have been seduced by medieval polemicists’ views of heresy. They have constructed a fictional ‘Cathar church’ which did not exist in the minds of its supposed ministers, and most certainly not in those of ordinary believers” (3-4). While I do not aim to resolve the question of the existence of Catharism or organized heretical groups, I examine those specific perceptions of the heretics rather than the beliefs themselves; such a focus can help demonstrate medieval attitudes toward perceptions of heresy and how the Church responded to the alleged existence of those beliefs.117

Major beliefs of the Cathar church were said to have included the dualistic separation of soul and body as well as the evils of marriage; practicing extreme asceticism, the Cathars rejected the material world as evil and shunned the corporeal human body along with it. Because of their dedication to the rejection of the material world, the Cathars held that they would be reincarnated repeatedly until they were able fully to embrace a lifestyle in accordance with such material rejection. While Jerome writes that women who reject their femininity can earn the title of male, the Cathars would literalize this spiritual transcendence of gender with their concept of the sexed body itself, male or female, as irrelevant to redemption. Jennifer Ward posits that the irrelevance of gender to the Cathars meant that women could achieve far more independence within its hierarchy than in the orthodox Christian Church, even being allowed to become Perfecti and administer the Cathar sacrament of *consolamentum* (241-42). The perceived proliferation of heresies inevitably led the Church to mobilize against them, with Pope Innocent III calling for the Albigensian Crusade, which would lead to the Crusaders “committ[ing] atrocities of such magnitude that they are still echoing down the centuries” (Ward 16). Jacobus

117 Jörg Feuchter presents compelling evidence for “the existence of an organized, self-consciously dissident religious group” in Languedoc” (113).
was not a Crusader, and yet his *Legenda* contributed to the general quest of the Church to stamp out heresy. Stouck has already pointed out that hagiographies, while conventional, constantly shift in nuance and bias to fit the new demands of the conventions of their given times and places. Thus, Reames observes that the *Legenda* reflects the important thirteenth-century reality that the “ecclesiastical hierarchy … had begun to lose its moral authority and was trying to compensate by using its powers to intimidate and coerce” (118). Jacobus’s *Legenda*, she argues, tends to shift focus in its revisions to hagiographical legends by emphasizing that “no punishment is too dire for God to inflict on those who fail to respect and obey their clerical superiors” (126).

In considering the utilization of and possibilities for the saint’s gendered body and identity, I discuss Jacobus’s presentation of a particular episode in Eugenia’s life and then compare it to the *Vitae Patrum* version, an earlier popular version which would have greatly influenced the legendaries of Jean de Mailly and Bartholomew of Trent from which Jacobus drew for his direct source material. As Jacobus had no knowledge of Greek or Armenian, and thus would not have known about the implications of those accounts’ more transgressive elements, this comparison between the Latin versions will suggest the ways that Jacobus’s version makes particular changes in adapting the legend for Dominican purposes, excising transgressive details in the service of compressing and revising the saint’s life. However, before moving into a direct comparison of Jacobus’s *Legenda* and the earlier *Vitae Patrum*, I discuss an element of the tale absent altogether from Latin versions: Eugenia’s affinity for Saint Thekla. This two-part comparison will allow for a discussion not only of Jacobus’s revisions, but for a broader picture of the ways in which Eugenia’s legend imagined the possibilities for gendered performances and identities.
Eugenia, Old and New

The earliest Greek and Armenian versions of the saint’s life contribute significant nuances for broader understandings of gendered potential. Jacobus would not have been familiar with the earlier Greek and Armenian, and so a comparison to the Legenda might not be as telling as it is for the Latin Vitae. Yet a consideration of the earlier versions’ different presentations of how the saint’s gender has been fantasized can contribute to decentering the mutually definitive linkage of body and gender and broadening understandings for how gender can be imagined and performed. To that end, I briefly consider the earliest Armenian version of Eugenia’s legend, which includes her relationship with Saint Thekla, deemed heretical and absent altogether from the later accounts. The affinity between Eugenia and Thekla contributes another layer of complication for exploring the relationship between gender and the body, between social performance and identity; following Thekla’s example of living as a man to follow Saint Paul, Eugenia instantiates a tradition of transgressively gendered mimetic acts in the pursuit of proximity to God.

First, I outline Thekla’s tale, and the story Eugenia would have read of her in the Greek and Armenian versions. Such a familiarization will help provide insight into the allegedly heretical nature, and thus dangerous potential, of her tale. Indeed, the earliest record of her life comes from the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, a text which came under fire by Tertullian in his invective against the possibility of allowing women to confer baptism or to preach the word of God. He even claims that he has located the author, who confesses to the forgery of the text on account of his adoration of Paul (Ante-Nicene Fathers XVII.8706-8721). Thekla, enamored with Paul’s teachings on virginity, refuses to be separated from him, leaving behind her mother and fiancé Thamyris and dressing in male garb as needed in order to follow him. Ultimately, she
travels to preach and to encourage women to take vows of chastity, thus pointing to its clear potential as support for female power in the prelacy. Before the saint’s tale ever garnered a reputation as heretical, though, Eugenia’s legend’s use of the tale seems to necessitate a reconciliation with the patriarchal tendencies of developing Christianity. Yet, such reconciliation is possible precisely through John Goodspeed’s characterization of the Acts of Paul and Thecla as “religious romance,” a convention that would mix strictly orthodox hagiography with the flexibilities of fiction and spiritual fantasy (185).

At the beginning of the Greek and Armenian versions of Eugenia’s story, Eugenia’s father relates to her news of the consul Aquilinus’s interest in marrying her. Eugenia, of course, refuses, but her father and the consul “strove to beguile her holy soul by all sorts of promises and tricks” (Conybeare 158). Immediately following the men’s attempts to lure Eugenia toward secular marriage, “it chanced that there fell into her hands the history of the holy Apostle Paul and of the blessed Virgin Thekla” (158). This chance meeting, so to speak, with Thekla intimates the beginnings of a mimetic tradition of desire; meditating on Thekla’s example as she resolves on converting to Christianity, Eugenia, too, disguises herself sartorially to follow the teachings she has decided are superior. Given the version’s similarities in the remainder of the plot to the Latin Vitae, this version presents an even stronger emphasis on the possibility not only for a distinct female spiritual community, but also a trans-historical one, replacing traditional models of piety with transgressive ones. Thekla’s importance in the Greek and Armenian versions resonates strongly with the final episodes featuring a community of religious women founded for and by women. The tale sets up the importance of imitation in following personal dedications to spirituality, beginning with Eugenia’s intense desire to follow Thekla’s example in her own conversion. So, while Eugenia’s “cross-dressing” might stand out as an example of the epitome of
piety, her location within a tradition of women following each other’s example points to the potential for binary and, at times, essentialist models of gendered spirituality and embodiment to become more and more ambiguous. In other words, one cross-dressed saint exhibiting superior piety in departing from traditionally feminine practices proves the alleged rule of male spirituality. However, transhistorical community of women following each other’s examples and collectively departing from those traditional practices suggests the inefficiency of a strictly binary system of gendering spiritual practice. Indeed, the Armenian version’s presentation of its final episodes in which Eugenia and Basilia interact maintains the importance of imitation throughout the entire tale.118

Without access to Jacobus’s most direct sources in Bartholomew of Trent and Jean de Mailly, it is hard to make definitive claims about the importance of particular presentations of details when comparing the different versions. However, doing such a comparison still suggests the wide range of possibilities for gendered performance and identity in the legend, and certainly the patterns of compression in the Legenda version, representing only what Jacobus found to be the key portions of the tale, suggest how Eugenia represented a mode of female sanctity in a particular context. Thus, Jacobus’s version begins by introducing Eugenia in terms of her familial relationships. First introduced are Protus and Hyacinth, her personal slaves and companions in the study of philosophy, followed by her noble Roman family members, headed by her father Philip who was appointed as prefect of Alexandria. After the pithy introduction, Eugenia demonstrates her spiritual capabilities by refusing the marriage request of Aquilinus, philosophizing that “A husband is to be chosen not for his ancestry but for his morals” (165). After having received and read a copy of the teachings of St. Paul, she becomes gradually more drawn to Christianity until she finally decides to convert after having heard Christians chanting,

118 “Basilia” is the variant spelling of the Old Latin version’s Basilisa.
“Omnes Dii gentium daemona, / Dominus autem caelos fecit” [All the gods of the Gentiles are demons, / but the Lord made the heaven]. She then discusses her plan to convert with Protus and Hyacinth, who, Jacobus reminds us, “had studied with her” (165); she dismisses their pagan studies in light of her newfound spiritual knowledge: “A usurped authority has used words to make me your mistress, but the truth makes me your sister. Let us then be brothers, and follow Christ!” (165). Eugenia then dons men’s clothing and, with her servants’ help, heads off to the monastery.

By way of comparison, the *Vitae Patrum* version begins with a lengthy introduction not to Eugenia, but to Philip and his dedication to philosophy; while he is indeed a Roman pagan, he is “more a student of the philosophers than a worshipper of idols,” yet for the sake of tradition, he outlaws Christianity and Judaism (17.1d.i). After the lengthy introduction to Philip, we learn that because of his dedication to philosophy, he gives his daughter Eugenia (in this version, introduced here for the first time) a thorough education in languages and philosophy, an education for which she is naturally apt: “She had a very sharp intelligence, and a memory so gifted that she had only to hear or read anything once in order to grasp the meaning of it and permanently retain it” (17.1d.ii). Her natural beauty, then, reflects her “even more beautiful…mental capacity” and “sweeter still…love of chastity” (17.1d.ii). Thus, her love of chastity leads her to turn down Aquilinus’s suit and to turn instead to the teachings of Saint Paul, which in this version are what convince her to begin life as a Christian. Indeed, her feminine characteristics, even before she takes on male garb, resonate with traditionally masculine values and foreshadow the gendered transfiguration that she soon will undergo. She then seeks out

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119 *Vitae Patrum*, hereafter referred to as *VP*: “Ipse uero plus licet philosophorum amicus quam fauror idolorum, Romanis tamen superstitionibus, ac si religiousus cultor, instabat, non rationi sed traditioni concordans.”

120 *VP*: “Erat enim acris ingenii, & tam memoriae capax, vt quidquid audiendo semel uel legendo potuisset arripere, perpetuo retineret. Eratatem Eugenia pulchra facie & eleganti corpore, sed pulchriot mente, & formosior castitate.”
Christians living on the outskirts of town in order to witness their lives, and hears them singing, which makes her “sigh and weep, and [confide] in her two slaves, eunuchs called Protus and Hyacinth” (17.1d.iii).\textsuperscript{121} The three then consult the Scriptures together and, at length, develop a plan to enter the monastery of Helenus. The \textit{Vitae} continues with a lengthy episode not included in Jacobus’s version, describing Helenus’s holy childhood and spiritual combat with the pagan Zareas.

Jacobus’s version, then, emphasizes the importance of the communal pursuit of knowledge; Eugenia and her servants (notably not named as eunuchs) pursue study together from the very beginning. While both versions ultimately relate that the three have studied together, the \textit{Vitae Patrum} emphasizes Eugenia’s natural aptitude, an aptitude reflected in her physical beauty as well. The elision of Eugenia’s natural beauty and knowledge from Jacobus’s version points to the importance of study for Christian conversion and lifestyle, an element of hard work emphasized by the Dominican Order. Eugenia, Protus, and Hyacinthus are all equally capable of learning, as both versions attest, and yet the \textit{Vitae Patrum} emphasizes the importance of her natural aptitude for conversion whereas Jacobus’s version emphasizes the importance of reading St. Paul and discussing the Scriptures. Significantly, by eliding discussion of Protus and Hyacinthus as eunuchs and presenting them only as slaves, Jacobus flattens the possibilities for gendered presentation. In his version, Eugenia merely dons men’s clothing as Helenus wouldn’t allow any women to come near him, whereas the \textit{Vitae Patrum} version shows an engaged consideration of the importance of gendered performance. In these early stages of the tale, her decision is largely one of convenience and sartorial disguise, not one that points to her gender performance indicating anything about her identity. Yet, it sets the stage for a more complex

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{VP}: “Hæc ita audiens suspiruit & fleuit, & dicit ad eunuchos pueros nomine Protum & Hyacinthum.”
understanding of how the legend fantasizes the possibilities for gender; Jacobus merely presents a person navigating how to avoid Helenus’s ban on women.

Following the introductory episodes, the tale moves on to discuss the aftereffects of Eugenia’s escape to the monastery. Jacobus introduces Helenus, the head of the monastery, with two defining characteristics: he would not allow women to approach him and he once successfully battled a heretic through a test of walking through fire. Helenus, after being approached by Eugenia, tells her, “‘Rightly do you call yourself a man, because you act like a man though you are a woman’. Her true sex was revealed to him by God” (165). After Helenus establishes firmly that Eugenia’s title of “man” is based solely on her spirituality, he welcomes her and her companions to the monastery. Meanwhile, Eugenia’s pagan family seeks her desperately, consulting soothsayers and worshipping idols, yet their searches are all for naught, as Eugenia, as Brother Eugene, remains safely within the monastery and even is elected to replace Helenus upon his death.

The significance of Jacobus’s version of events becomes more apparent when viewed in comparison to the Vitae Patrum’s more fully developed narration. In the Vitae Patrum, Helenus is introduced through the context of his battle with Zareas, who is described as a magician rather than a heretic. No mention is made of whether he allows women to approach him. He addresses Eugenia for the first time in a far more detailed speech after having received a dream vision absent from Jacobus’s account. In the dream vision, he encounters a goddess worshipped by throngs of people, and tells her that she is not a goddess but a creature of God and that she should not permit anyone to worship her. The goddess figure complies but demands to be “reunited…with the creator and foundation of [her] being” (17.1d.vii). Immediately after the dream vision, Helenus begins his speech to Eugenia and claims to have been made aware of her

122 VP: “Non te deseram, quousque; me creatori meo restituas & conditori.”
through the dream vision, reinforcing unity with God as being of utmost importance to the tale.

Helenus says:

You are well called Eugenius [“of noble birth”]…for you are acting manfully, and your heart will be strengthened by your faith in Christ. So Eugenius is a good name for you. But you should know that by the Holy Spirit I have already seen you and me in a vision, but you were in the body of a Eugenia. I have been told why you are here, though it was not given to me to know about these friends of yours. However, the Lord has deigned to reveal to me that you have prepared a most pleasing dwelling place for him in your body, for you have kept the prize of virginity and rejected the false blandishments of this present world. (17.1d.vii)¹²³

Her family, meanwhile, unsuccessfully seeks news of her whereabouts, as presented in Jacobus’s version. While they search, however, “the blessed Eugenia, manly in spirit as well as in clothing, remained in that monastery of men” (17.1d.ix).¹²⁴ Readers are told about the details of her spiritual excellence, ministering to the needs of her fellow monks to such an impeccable degree that their election of her as abbot, upon the death of Helenus, is preceded logically by the discussion of her superior spirituality. Eugenia does not lapse into the pride that might accompany such lavish praises of her actions, as she “was alarmed that they had chosen a woman to be superior over a man, contrary to all the rules, fearing in particular that they would take

¹²³ Given the complexities of the use of name and pronoun in the tale, my decisions of either male or female pronouns and of either a masculine- or feminine-inflected name are based on how the hagiographer presents the saint at a particular point in the legend. Vitae Patrum: “Recte te Eugenium vocas: viriliter enim agis, & confortetur cor tuum pro fide Christi. Ergo recte vocaris Eugeniius. Nam & hoc scias, quia Spiritu sancto nos & te Eugeniion corpore ante preuidimus, & qualify huc veneris: & quod isti tui sint, non me passus est preterire. Sed hoc mihi Dominus reuelare dignatus est, quod gratissimum ei habitaculum in corpore tuo praeperasti, custodiendo virginitatis praemium, & præsentis temporis blandimenta fallacia respuendo.”
¹²⁴ Vitae Patrum: “Beata autem Eugenia virili habitu & animo, in prædicto virorum monasterio permanebat.”
advantage of her and pay her no respect” (17.1d, x). Yet her fears do not come to fruition, as her fellow monks continue to read her identity in terms of her spirituality, not her corporeality. While she fears the repercussions of being perceived as female, her spirituality allows her both to transcend any relegation to the strict confines of a body and simultaneously to use her corporeality in ways previously impossible; indeed, the pronouns assigned to the saint are male, as he addresses his monks (“ait ad eos”).

When viewed alongside its source, then, Jacobus’s version clearly plays down the suggestion that Eugenia might actually be transformed as a result of her spirituality. His Helenus confines Eugenia to her female body despite conceding her superior spirituality. The Vitae Patrum Helenus intimates that the body of the person standing before him has been transformed from his dream-vision Eugenia to the spiritually and physically masculine Eugenius. Jacobus emphasizes her “true sex” while the Vitae Patrum intimates Eugenia’s transcendence of sex via spiritual gender. Although the earlier version contains Eugenia’s introspective fears about her femininity, her fears relate specifically to how she would be perceived; it is not that she fears the revelation of some sort of spiritual weakness as a direct result of her female sex, but that her fellow monks would be unable to consider her superior spirituality because of their perceptions of her femininity. When Eugenia does ascend to the head of the monastery, she is successful in her leadership role, and is careful to maintain sanctity and devotion. Thus, the tale suggests several possibilities, one being that a woman can, in fact, successfully run a monastery, contrary to the monks’ beliefs. Another possibility, especially given the complexities of spiritual gender, might be that Eugenia is not, like Melancia in the following episode, bound to the stereotypes associated with embodied femininity. Jacobus, then, is careful to maintain the distinction that

125 Vitae Patrum: “Tunc beata Eugenia metuens se feminam contra regulam viris praeponi; item timens ne omnes vnanimiter deprecantes sperneret.”
Eugenia is sartorially and spiritually, but not corporeally, transformed. The *Vitae Patrum* blurs that distinction between sartorial and corporeal by implying that spirituality can, quite literally, transform the sexed and gendered body.

The different versions’ handling of Eugenia’s sexed and gendered body comes to a climax in the following episode, when her body is, quite literally, put on trial and juxtaposed with Melancia’s. In Jacobus’s streamlined version of events, a rich noblewoman named Melancia, having been cured of quartan fever by the anointing of Brother Eugene, “took for granted that Brother Eugene was a man and visited him often, and, seeing how elegantly youthful and personally attractive he was, fell heatedly in love with him” (166). After trying to force Eugene into bed, Melancia finds herself spurned when Eugene responds, “You are well called Melancia, for the name says that you are filled with black perfidy and are the dark daughter of darkness, friend of the devil, leader of pollution, fuel of lust, sister of perpetual torment, and daughter of eternal death!” (166). While Jacobus tends to choose his words carefully, he holds nothing back in his representation of Eugene’s vitriol. Melancia then seeks to cover up her crimes by approaching the prefect Philip, Eugene’s father, and accusing Eugene of raping her. Philip orders that Eugene and all of his brothers bound in chains to be thrown into an arena along with wild beasts. While standing trial, Eugenia hides her identity from Philip and refuses to defend herself, claiming that it is better to suffer in patience than to allow Melancia to be convicted and punished. Yet after having listened to the false testimony of Melancia’s servants, Eugenia says,

‘The time for silence is past, it is now time to speak. I will not allow this wanton woman to impute crime to the servants of Christ and boast of her deception. To make sure that truth shall prevail over mendacity and wisdom conquer malice, I
will show the truth, not out of personal pride but for the glory of God!’ So saying, she opened her robe from the top to the waist, and was seen to be a woman. (167)

Overall, then, the tale continually reasserts the “truth” of Eugenia’s femininity. Melancia, occupying the role of the corrupt sinner, is unable to see that truth of femininity, and the same body that signifies sanctity for the Christian monks becomes the body that is misread and reconfigured as a sexual object for the sinner Melancia; Eugenia-Eugene is constructed, then, by the perceptions of others, as either spiritually transcendent or sexually alluring and, at times, threatening, a contradiction that must be resolved through trial. By revealing her bare torso in court, Eugenia conflates “truth” with embodiment, a move that allows Jacobus’s tale to assert Eugenia’s spiritual excellence without conceding any true gender transformations.

The Vitae Patrum depicts Melanthia’s initial interactions with Brother Eugene as being financially fueled; she is insulted that Eugene will not accept payment for having cured her of quartan ague, and becomes more and more intent on satisfying what she believes to be his desire for a higher payment.126 During these interactions, Melanthia “began to get quite enamoured of this person whom she thought to be a very elegant young man” (17.1d.xii).127 When she tries to force herself upon him, she appeals to his alleged greed, begging, “Look, I can offer you enormous wealth, tons of gold, and plenty of silver, and a large and varied household. I can be very generous. I have no children, I have been widowed for the last year. Take their place. Be master not only of all my possessions but of me, too” (17.1d.xii).128 Although all versions of the legend include the attempted seduction scene, the Vitae Patrum invites the very real possibility

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126 Note variable spellings of the name, depending on the version.
127 VP: “Fit assidua circa beatam Eugeniam, & in nullo deprehendens quod esset femina elegantia decipitur iuuenitis.”
128 VP: “Ecce possessionum locupletatio infinita, & ecce auri pondus immensum, & argenti ministerium copiosum, & familie infinitus est numeros: dignitas generositatis est mihi: hoc anno absque filiis viduata sum, succede pro eis in facultatibus meis, & non solum rerum mearum, sed meus esto iam dominus.”
that Eugene could exert power as a man in the secular as well as spiritual worlds, as Melanthia invites Eugene not only to have sex with her, but also to join her household, thus wielding control as a husband and as an economic agent. The tale does not restrict the saint’s masculinity to spirituality, but rather forces the reader to consider, along with Melanthia’s invitation, the real possibility for his gendered transformations; indeed, if social gender is constructed partly by how people present themselves and are perceived by others, Eugene’s gendered performance of masculinity affords him corporeal transcendence, as the story intimates the Eugene could be a man not just inside the monastery but also in the secular world.

If Eugene’s performance of gender is revealed not to depend on a script of female embodiment, then the *Vitae Patrum* presents the possibility for a liberation from expectations for the sexed body, a possibility flattened out in Jacobus’s version. The danger of this possibility is compounded during the ensuing trial scene; after having accused Eugene of attempting to seduce her to the prefect Philip, Melanthia and her servants continue to bear false witness against Eugene and the fellow monks, thus leading to the possibility of their impending martyrdom. Finally, Eugene decides to reveal his previous identity of Eugenia in order to prevent the mockery of Christianity:

‘So great is the power of His name that even women who fear him can come to be worth as much as any man. We believe that neither sex is considered to be superior in His sight, since the blessed apostle Paul, the universal Christian teacher, has said that the Lord makes no distinction between male and female, for in Christ all are one. I accepted this saying with a whole heart. With complete trust in Christ I decided to be a woman no longer, but to live bravely as a man in Christ, and preserve my virginity intact. I have not taken on some twisted
semblance of honesty as if I were a man pretending to be a woman, but as a woman I have lived as a man, while strongly embracing virginity in Christ.’

Having said this she tore the tunic she was wearing from top to bottom and stood revealed as a woman. (17.1d.xv)²⁹

Besides being twice as lengthy as Jacobus’s revision, as is characteristic of the version, the Vitae Patrum exoneration scene engages with the potential for gender transformation that Melanthia’s seductions make so dangerous. Whereas Jacobus continually affirms Eugenia’s spiritual masculinity as distinct from her female body, with her masculine garb merely a sartorial disguise, the Vitae asserts the possibility, in very explicit terms, that Eugenia could leave behind the social restrictions of having a female body and become Eugene; the clothes are not merely sartorial disguise, then, but indicators of true identity and spirituality.³⁰ Along with the assertion that she “decided to be a woman no longer, but to live bravely as a man in Christ,” this decision to remove clothing does not mean that true spiritual identity has been shed. Indeed, Eugenia asserts, “I have not taken on some twisted semblance of honesty as if I were a man pretending to be a woman,” and so while the clothes might signify a true spiritual identity, their removal does

²⁹ VP: “Tanta enim est virtus nominis eius, vt etiam feminae in timore eius posite, virilem obtineant dignitatem: & neque eus sexus diuersitas fide potest inueniri superior, cum beatus Paulus apostolus magister omnium Christianorum dicat, quod apud Dominum non sit discretio masculi & feminae: omnes enim in Christo vnum sumus. Huius ergo normam animo feruente suscepi, & ex confidentia quam in Christo habui, nolui esse femina, sed virginitatem immaculatam tota animi intentione consueruam, virum gessi constanter in Christo. Non enim infrunitam honestatis simulationem assumpi, vt vir feminam simularem: sed feminam viriliter agendo, virum gessi, virginitatem que in Christo est, fortiter amplectendo. Et hæc dicens, scidet a capite tunicam, qua erat induta, & apparuit femina.”

³⁰ MS M.675, a French manuscript of the Legenda aurea, illustrated by the Master of the Jardin de vertueuse consolation ca. 1460 and held in the Pierpont Morgan Library, depicts Saint Eugenia with Saints Protus and Hyacinthus. The archive’s description of the page is as follows: “SS. Protus and Hyacinthus wear the full-length version of the man’s gown — an alternate garment often preferred by middle-aged or older men. Above a full skirt, the torso was the same as with the short gown: pleats and padded shoulders formed a flattering male silhouette. Eugenia’s attire, however, is anachronistic: the low wide neck and tippets hanging from her sleeves hark back to the fourteenth century. Her bejeweled turban (like that worn by the Roman emperor at the right) is complete fantasy. The illuminator used out-of-date and invented garments to place the martyrdom in a distant time and place, third-century Rome.” The anachronistic depiction of Eugenia suggests the manuscript’s presentation of her as an ideal, a saint whose martyrdom ranks her as a model of female chastity and devotion; juxtaposed with Protus and Hyacinthus, dressed in proper male garb regardless of their status as eunuchs, Eugenia’s feminine garb suggests that her holiness is not, ultimately, because of her assumption of masculinity but because of her navigation of gendered norms to maintain total chastity and ideal saintly femininity.
not negate that identity. Whereas Jacobus’s version conflates the revelation of the female body with the revelation of true femininity, the *Vitae Patrum*’s use of the scene suggests the malleability of gender and its performance; Eugene is not a woman using male garb to disguise herself and escape marriage, but a person whose spirituality actually can transform gendered identity, regardless of embodiment.

Examining the versions’ presentations of Eugene-Eugenia after the court trial scenes is especially important for a discussion of gender presentation and possibility; indeed, with the need for sartorial disguise gone and Eugene having revealed himself as Eugenia, it might follow that the saint can now resume a readily recognizable female identity. This is largely what happens in Jacobus’s version of Eugenia’s life; after Eugenia “opened her robe from the top to the waist, and was seen to be a woman,” she identifies her family members by name and they rush to embrace her. After a tearful family embrace, the parents “clothed Eugenia in cloth of gold and raised her on high, and fire came down from heaven and consumed Melancia and her coconspirators” (167). Given the importance of clothing in this tale, the parents’ immediate move to re-dress Eugenia in female garb suggests the confirmation of her revealed femininity; the clothing must match the identity. Importantly, the act of being socially re-clothed—and redressed—again underscores Eugenia’s gendered body in the tale as something manipulated and constructed by others to symbolize her spirituality, rather than to signify any individual identity; her family attempts to reconfigure her sartorially in order to remedy what they perceive as a false or wrongful presentation of identity. Even though at the beginning of the tale she dresses herself as a monk alone, the tale asserts the superficial nature of her sartorial transformation; she does not transcend her own embodiment. By the end of the tale, her family dresses her in clothing appropriate for signifying her function as a female character. She is not someone whose identity
transcended the boundaries of the body, but a female saint whose masculinity is deployed only to symbolize superior spirituality. This sartorial transformation is held in juxtaposition with the action immediately following it; as Eugenia is returned to her female identity, Melancia is consumed in flames. The joining of the two actions suggests the symbolic value of Eugenia’s femininity; the *Legenda* champions Eugenia’s piety while condemning Melancia and eradicating her from the earth. As I will discuss shortly, the *Vitae Patrum* depicts a fire consuming only Melanthia’s possessions, and so Jacobus’s increased punishment of Melancia suggests how sinful sexuality and corruptible bodies must be eradicated so that pious and virtuous bodies—like Eugenia’s—can provide models of spirituality for people to follow.

In the *Vitae Patrum*, Eugene-Eugenia’s gender continues to be a source of complexity beyond spiritual symbolism. While the *Legenda* presents the family’s re-dressing of Eugenia in contrast with the utter destruction of Melancia, the *Vitae* lingers on the details of the sartorial transformation. After the family recognizes their child, a “tunic of gold cloth was brought, which Eugenia put on, albeit unwillingly, and she was lifted aloft and taken up to the prefect’s stall” (17.1d.xvi). Once she is taken up to the prefect’s stall, the crowds of people gathered with the intention of burying Eugenia after execution instead sing psalms of praise, and the Christians who had been exiled to the margins of town are allowed to reenter. Shortly thereafter, a divine fire burns Melanthia’s house and Eugenia’s entire family converts. In this version, then, Eugenia is a symbol of spiritual piety, as Jacobus will maintain. Yet the *Vitae*’s detail that she is dressed in rich female garb “unwillingly” makes any question of her gendered presentation far more complex than mere spiritual symbolism. Her discomfort with the female clothing suggests that clothing overall is not merely a tool for disguise; indeed, she has already chosen to tear off her

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131 *VP*: “Deferuntur vestimenta auro texta, & licet inuita, induitur, atque in excelso tribulani posita, in sublime attollitur.”
tunic and reveal her woman’s body, and so there is no need for male clothing anymore to keep her ensconced within the monastery. The female clothing, then, contradicts Eugenia’s identity, in terms of class and gender alike. As Eugenia is carried away in triumphal procession, she becomes, for the crowds witnessing her vindication, an embodied symbol of chastity and the dominance of Christianity. The Legenda and the Vitae alike emphasize the inevitability of Christianity reigning dominant, and yet the different depictions of sartorial transformation point to the original Vitae’s complex depictions of personal identity; in the Vitae, Eugenia’s body is both symbol to the crowds of witnesses and locus of identity for the self. The Legenda Eugenia is deployed as the hagiographer’s symbol of superior spirituality while the Vitae Eugenia is not only a symbol but also a complex person whose identity cannot be defined in terms of external sartorial markers.

Finally, the Vitae contains a significant episode absent altogether from Jacobus’s Legenda. Both versions depict the eventual martyrdom of both Eugenia and her now-converted family under the persecution of emperors Valerian and Gallus. Yet the Vitae, before the martyrdom episode, tells of the numbers of matrons and virgins following Eugenia to be converted and, for some of them, consecrated as a Bride of Christ. A royal pagan woman named Basilla hears of Eugenia’s followers and wishes to join her, but cannot, given her family’s religion. In order to circumvent the wishes of her family, Eugenia sends Protus and Hyacinth to Basilla, and together, they engage in Christian devotion. After Basilla’s initial instruction, the Vitae tells that “by the mercy of Christ she and the blessed Eugenia spent practically every night in each other’s company” (17.1d.xx).132 This scene of intense devotion, separate from any male religious authority, points to the ability of religious women to operate entirely outside of the

132 VP: “Confirmata autem beata Basilla in timore Dei, procurante misericordia Christi, pæne omnibus noctibus mutuis se fruebantur adspectibus ipsa & beata Eugenia.”
control of the monastery. The holy Cornelius, pope of Rome, performs Sunday mass for the women, but the Vitae emphasizes that beyond this one task, the religious community is run entirely by women and eunuchs: “How many virgins came to the Saviour through Eugenia! How many brides came to Christ through Basilla! How many women gladly embraced their widowhood through Claudia! How many young men put their trust in Christ the Lord through Protus and Hyacinth!” (17.1d.xxi).133

In moving straight from the courtroom reconciliation scene and subsequent conversion scenes to Eugenia’s martyrdom, Jacobus’s version emphasizes the immediate and dire threat to Christianity; mere conversion precedes the persecution and martyrdom of first Eugenia and then her entire family. The Vitae version does not separate martyrdom from Christian conversion, obviously, but its interspersed tale of the bond between Basilla and Eugenia as well as the female community of Christian devotees means that the version includes far more nuanced possibilities for the dangerous potential of their actions that the martyrdom would seek to quash. The Vitae, rather than present Eugenia as the victim of a generalized Christian persecution undertaken by Valerian and Gallus, uses Basilla’s interspersed tale as a specific reason for the martyrdom: as does Eugenia at the beginning of her tale, Basilla refuses to marry her betrothed, a man named Pompeius, sending him the message, “I know of hardly any reason at all why I should see you, or listen to you, or even greet you” (17.1d.xxv).134 Her dismissal of Pompeius sends him into an angry frenzy, prostrating himself before the Roman senate and enumerating his woes with maudlin and verbose flair. First, he calls for the Emperor to protect Roman citizens by banishing “these new gods that Eugenia has brought with her from Egypt,” claiming that the Christians

133 VP: “O quantas per Eugeniam virgines Saluator inuenit! quantas etiam per Basillam Christus sponsas obtinuit! quantae per Claudiam viduitatem prompta voluntate seruarunt! quanti iuuenes per Protum & Hyacinthum Christo Domino crediderunt!”
134 VP: “Caussam te videndi penitus nullam me habere cognoscas, neque audiendi, neque salutandi.”
have been “undermining the republic” and “subverting the laws of nature; they break marriages up and decide about marriages themselves” (17.1d.xxv). He thus deftly interweaves an appeal to the Emperor’s political control with a personal complaint about his inability to control his betrothed. He continues his appeal, elevating the stakes and intensifying his rhetoric:

O most godly Emperor, what shall we do? It seems we now have gods who make husbands superfluous, and shall they see it come to pass that there will be no younger generation capable of taking command? Whence will come the renewal of Roman power? Whence shall the Roman army renew its strength? Will there be victorious women to bend the necks of the enemy into submission to your right hand, if we are not to have wives, if promised brides escape from us and we say nothing? (17.1d.xxv).

His patriarchal temper tantrum reveals, then, the extent of Eugenia’s potential for alternative models of female piety and embodiment. By placing those anxieties in the mouths and minds of the persecutors, the tale suggests, much like Eugenia’s claim that she “live[d] bravely as a man in Christ,” that alternative models of female piety can radically reorder the hierarchies of a secular society; not merely betrothed to Christ and ensconced within the walls of a monastery, these women reveal the weaknesses of the Roman Empire in its dependence on the subjugation of its women for the alleged greater good of military dominance (17.1d.xv).

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135 VP: “Subuenite Romanis vestris sacratissimi principes, & deos nouos quos Eugenia fecu adduxit ab Ægypto veniens, ab haec urbe separate. Diu est enim, quod hi qui Christiani dicuntur, republicae noccent: qui irrint legum nostrarum sacrosancta carimonia, & omnipotentos deos nostros, ac si vana simulacra, despiciunt. Iura quoque ipsius naturae pervertunt, separant coniugium, gratiam sponsaram sibi associant: & dicit iniquum esse, si sponsum accipiat.”

136 VP: “Quid faciemus piissimi Imperatores? Inuenti sunt dii, qui homines prohibeant, & quibus ista videbunt, si nati non fuerint quibus valeat imperari? Vbi reparatio Romanarum virium? vbi Romani exercitus rediuiua certamina? Pro quibus victrices dextræ vestrum ceruiues inclinabunt, si iam vos habendae non erunt, si sponsas amittimus, & tacemus?”

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Indeed, Jacobus’s version ends with the rapid martyrdoms of Eugenia, her mother Claudia, and then Protus and Hyacinthus, concluding that “[t]hey suffered under Valerian and Gallus, about A.D. 256” (167). Such a fast-paced conclusion emphasizes the need to live an orthodox lifestyle; with such imminent threats to Christianity, converts must be prepared to be, quite literally, tested by fire for their faith. Again, the *Vitae* too supports the necessity of devotion and piety, and yet, it does not conclude with suffering and martyrdom. Instead, it relates how Eugenia visits her mother after having been martyred in order to comfort Claudia and to inform her that “Christ has led me to share in the joyfulness of the saints, and has numbered my father amongst the patriarchs. And behold, this Sunday he will receive you into the everlasting joys. Encourage your sons, my brothers, to keep the sign of the cross, that they too may come to share glory with us” (17.1d.xxx). The martyrdoms of Eugenia’s family, then, are narrated not by the hagiographer but by Eugenia herself, intimating an emphasis on the transcendence of human embodiment and the supreme glory of God’s grace in heaven, rather than the dangers of persecution. The dangers of alternative models of female piety bemoaned by Pompeius fade into the background at the conclusion, and yet the focus on Eugenia’s transcendence through martyrdom recollects those “dangers,” transfiguring them instead into agentive models of possibility; Eugenia’s final image in her tale shows her “enfolded in a light so brilliant that human eye could not bear it, as the Angels came down singing a hymn to God in voices of a beauty beyond description, except that it was the name of Jesus Christ and his holy Spirit that resounded through their praises” (17.1d.xxx). Her final presentation in the tale places her beyond the bounds of human vision or description, her beauty being possible only through God, and parallels her gendered presentation identity throughout the entire version of the tale; the pronouns and names

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used to describe Eugene-Eugenia waver, at times correlating to how the saint is perceived by others but at other times seemingly haphazard. The saint’s self-identity is one that is impossible to describe without the reminder that it is an identity based on the transcendence of embodiment made possible through piety.

_Cross-Dressing for Jesus and the Intimations of Transformation_

Indeed, it might seem anti-climactic for a discussion of gendered possibility to claim, ultimately, that varied gendered identities and embodiments are made possible only through devotion to God and constant surveillance of one’s own spiritual constancy. Yet within the context of the hagiographical genre, such spiritual and corporeal transcendence of the sexed and socially gendered body provides fundamental possibilities for models of piety that are not limited to trading secular marriage for spiritual marriage. Rather than intimating only the possibility that such “cross-dressed” saints are transforming themselves sartorially in order to preserve their virginity and remain as close to God as possible, perhaps even becoming betrothed to Jesus himself, these tales present the possibility for saints to perform gendered identities beyond uniform femininity or masculinity as well; Eugene-Eugenia’s gendered performance and reception throughout the legend widens the definitions for models of gender, as they cannot be easily categorized as either masculine or feminine. Instead, living sometimes as a young woman, sometimes as a young man closely associated with eunuchry, and identifying as someone who “as a woman...lived as a man,” the saint decouples the body itself from its gendered potential. Yet this is not to say that Eugenia’s legend severs gender from the body; instead, by decentering the notion that the two are mutually definitive, the saint’s life points toward a more constructive
model of social gender and identity in which embodiment is something that can be navigated and utilized to create new possibilities for gender.

In returning to the overall possibilities for gender in Eugenia’s legendary, it is clear that the saint resists any simple characterization. Eugene-Eugenia simultaneously troubles the alleged boundary between masculine and feminine both in terms of gender and of piety, and also the allegedly mutually definitive nature of body and identity. The body of the saint, throughout various versions of the tales, functions as another form of garb, signifying what the saint desires at the time. Cloaked in a male tunic, the body functions as male. Revealed in the nude, the body is revealed as female. And yet that revelation does not necessarily shut down the saint’s gendered transformations and transcendent embodiment; Eugenia reclaims the allegedly female body, used in order to corroborate truth, as a site of personal identity alongside its larger social symbolism. It can be used both to symbolize and to obscure identity, an important distinction to make when so often, the body is misread and signifies a false identity.

In returning to the gendered contentions with which I begin this chapter—Garber’s argument to look at the figure of the transvestite and Namaste’s charge not to flatten out possibilities for lived experience in the name of theory—Eugenia’s legend provides interesting material for considering both Garber’s and Namaste’s contentions. And yet ultimately, what is important to emphasize by way of conclusion is the broad range of possibilities inherent in Eugenia’s legendary. Fantasized as spiritual ideal and didactic symbol, she also, through her interactions with other characters, points to the possibilities for the lived experiences of people whose performed genders and identities would not have been easily resolvable or nameable with limited and binarily gendered linguistic descriptors; navigating the world as either male or female, as both and neither, Eugenia’s legendary should serve as a reminder that the quest to name gender
can, at times, legitimate identity. Yet remaining outside the restriction of a single descriptor can also serve to emphasize transcendence both of and, more importantly, through the body. As the overall legendary presents the broad varieties for imagining Eugenia’s tale, so too does Eugenia present the broad varieties for imagining and performing gender beyond an essentialist binary.
Chapter Four – Beyond the Body of Chaucer’s Pardoner

The Pardoner’s Desires

While the Canterbury Tales feature a wide array of characters whose gendered embodiment is integral to their literary personalities, there is none so uniquely and ambiguously gendered as the Pardoner; as the narrator himself muses, “I trewe he were a geldyng or a mare” (I.671). This single line has inspired many Chaucerian scholars over the last century to delve into the question of what exactly this means for the gender, sexuality, and sexual anatomy of the Pardoner. In other words, how and why does a queer body become the placeholder for so many questions about where all bodies and identities fit in society? How does queerness, and in particular, a queerness marked by ambiguous or transgressive gender, serve as a simultaneously fascinating and loathsome symbol of social desires? As Robin Malo points out, of the 45 lines devoted to the Pardoner in the “General Prologue,” there are fourteen lines devoted to his physical appearance and eighteen to detailed descriptions of his relics. However, most modern criticism of the tale, rather than read the significance of the relics themselves, “foregrounds the Pardoner’s gender-identity and sexual proclivities, his status as a preacher, his moral decrepitude, and the quality of his rhetoric” (Malo 83). Yet as Carolyn Dinshaw points out, relics, like the body of the Pardoner himself, “are fragments, and cannot properly fill the lack that hollows the Pardoner’s being” (“Eunuch” 28). Indeed, he is a figure trapped in the stasis of his own desires, frustrating the possibility for his own futurity or salvation beyond the limited world of his own carnal desires.

This chapter considers the Pardoner’s location in the Canterbury Tales both on his own terms and on the narrator’s and Host’s portrayals of him. This approach shows how the Pardoner,
while certainly viewed as the sexual Other by the Host and many literary critics as well, is, when viewed on his own terms, a perverse christomimetic character; he positions himself as a preacher imitating Christ’s message, guiding his flock of pilgrims toward absolution and yet renegotiating the terms of that absolution. He sublimes his own desires into his words, whether those words are potent or impotent, and indulges in the simulated world of his own carnality. By using his ambiguously gendered body to his own advantage while preaching and positioning himself as hedonist savior to the pilgrims, he creates a human-centered, hedonistic religion of his own.

Based on repudiation, desire, and capitulation, the religion of the Pardoner conflates the sale of indulgences with the sins of indulgence, encouraging pilgrims to enjoy the full extent of corporeality as a means of drawing themselves closer to the Pardoner-as-god.

There undeniably is something particularly appealing about the variably unknowable or ambiguous body of the Pardoner and how that translates to its function in the tale overall. Foundational critics such as Walter Clyde Curry, Beryl Rowland, Monica E. McAlpine, Donald Howard, and more have already initiated questions about the Pardoner’s symbolic resonance in readings that view the body as evidence of otherness. As Glenn Burger characterizes those readings, “the readily apparent perversity of the Pardoner’s body provides convincing truth of his own identity” (Queer Nation 140). Rather than define the body of the Pardoner and its implications for his sexual proclivities or gender identity, I question how its presentation has contributed to such obsession with needing to know the Pardoner, a need that verges, at times, into knowing in the biblical sense, fixated as it is on the connections between the Pardoner’s genitals and his sexuality. Many previous readings of the Pardoner provide important bases for how the body has been viewed and used to signify, and so I read the Pardoner on his own terms, through resisting the assumption that the description of his body marks him as Other, perverse,
deficient, or abnormal. Rather, his allegedly atypically sexed and gendered body functions as a lens through which the other pilgrims can consider themselves and their status as members of a group.

While the Pardoner is one of a few pilgrims blatantly espousing gluttonous ideals, he is the only one whose very body comes under suspicion of deception. Thus, the range of reactions he has received from critics over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first skews critical attention to the Pardoner toward a type of literary diagnostics. Remembering the corporeal desires of nearly all the other pilgrims provides important balance for considering why the Pardoner has been singled out for such anatomical inspection; focusing solely on the Pardoner, in turn, helps substantiate the possibility for his own alterity in the face of the group’s alleged normativity. As Elspeth Whitney summarizes readings of the Pardoner’s identity:

Since Walter Curry’s introduction of the topic in 1919, when he named the Pardoner as a eunuch ex navitate, the Pardoner has been characterized as a ‘normal’ male, a congenital eunuch, a man who has been castrated, a man impotent but physically intact, a hermaphrodite, ‘a testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type’, an oversexed womanizer, an alcoholic, a ‘drag queen’, a cross-dressed woman, and, most resonantly, a homosexual. (357-58)

Certainly, there must be an attractive quality to the seemingly lurid and unknowable nature of the Pardoner’s body; as Aristotle asserts about the nature of knowledge-production, the best learning moments begin with attention to moments of confusion: “It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too” (Metaphysics
1.982b). The simultaneous unknowability and ambiguity of the Pardoner’s body—the promise that we might know the Pardoner if only we read the clues more carefully—presents a great opportunity for those “obvious perplexities,” although further readings of the Pardoner and his tale must keep in balance interpretations that focus on gendered embodiment and the manipulation of gendered stereotypes and tropes. Whitney’s subsequent discussion of the approaches of Robert Sturges, Dinshaw, and Burger characterizes them as being part of a recent trend to “retreat from a definitive naming of the Pardoner’s physical condition” and instead follow Sturges’s line of reasoning; Sturges suggests that the Pardoner is marked by the “impossibly incoherent” (Pardoner 78) while Whitney argues further that his identity is marked by pure performance, “emblematic of the Pardoner’s role as a reminder of the disrupting power of gender ambiguity” (358). Ultimately, Whitney claims that “[t]his line of thought threatens to erase the Pardoner’s body altogether” (359). While it is important to acknowledge the influence of the body on perceptions of the character, it is simultaneously important to remember that the Pardoner is also a literary abstraction, just like the sensationalized hagiographic depictions of saints. A reading of the Pardoner, then, must consider both the physicality of his body—and not simply characterizations of his gender or sexuality as related to that physicality—and the ways that the Tales utilize his body to point to various social anxieties ranging from moral preaching to proper embodiment.

More recently, scholars have begun to consider various aspects of the Pardoner’s character to move beyond questions of how his embodiment could symbolize ambiguity, transgression, or moral depravity. David Rollo considers the Pardoner alongside a host of other hermaphroditic literary characters, linking him to Jean de Meun’s Roman de la Rose; the Host substitutes “coillons” for “relikes” in the final verbal castration scene of the Pardoner’s Tale,
which Rollo argues “recalls the semiotic shift that Reason effects in *Rose* when, accusing Amant of allowing his discomfort with the referent to influence his response to the sign, she states that he would hate the word ‘reliques’ if it were the conventional signifier for testicles” (227). The argument resonates with earlier studies that lean toward diagnosing the Pardoner based on the conditions of his body, but Rollo departs from such studies by studying the Pardoner’s embodiment not in terms of its essential immorality, but its placement within a literary tradition of symbolic embodiment. In a similar re-envisioning of reading the Pardoner’s body, Whitney, discussed briefly above, resists readings of the Pardoner that consider him unknowable or unnameable and instead proposes that he should be read through medieval complexion theory. In doing so, his alleged effeminacy could be considered atypical but natural, and yet still allow for the possibility that he could be “strong enough to dangerously overwhelm the moral limits and controls of others” (389). Will Stockton provides a refreshing reading of the Pardoner that ultimately claims his inclusion in the group of pilgrims rather than his abjection through the maneuvering of cynicism; as he defines it, “to be cynical is to submit fully to an ideological structure despite knowing better” (97). I find the Pardoner to manipulate the power of cynicism, bluntly announcing his ruse to his audience and yet still inviting them to kiss his relics, buy his pardon, and share in his indulgent cycle of corporal—as opposed to spiritual—present-day salvation in the form of capitulating to human desire. While this community of sinners does not

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138 William Frank Bryan and Germaine Dempster list Jean de Meun’s allegorical figure of Faux-Semblant in Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* as a source for the Pardoner. Dempster notes that Faux-Semblant’s speeches use the same technique of public confession as Chaucer’s Pardoner and that both characters confess to the sins of hypocrisy and self-interest (409). Mary Hamel notes that the *Roman* also influenced the Friar’s portrait in the “General Prologue.” Regarding the Pardoner, she notes the influence of Faux Semblant, and further, that Faux Semblant’s confession served as source material not just for its public confession technique but also for specific verbal parallels and overall theme (269). John Halverson notes that critics agree nearly unanimously on Jean de Meun’s influence on Chaucer’s Pardoner through the allegorical Faux Semblant. However, he also notes the gulf between the allegorical *Roman de la Rose* and the “mundane road to Canterbury,” as Faux Semblant literally is false-seeming while the Pardoner is a cheat and a thief (188). Rollo’s more recent study thus complicates the relationship between the allegorical world of the *Roman* and Chaucer’s presentation of embodied subjects, literary constructions though they may be.
come to fruition according to the Pardoner’s desires, Stockton argues that the final kiss, rather than silence and render the Pardoner abject, “potentially registers as the ultimate cynical gesture that subordinates knowledge to silence and social grace as the price of order” (117). Thus, it keeps the Pardoner and the rest of the pilgrims “from falling out of the fellowship and afford[ing] the continuous redrawing of social and temporal boundaries” as they laugh and ride away (118). Stockton’s reading of the navigation of power exchanged in dialogue between the pilgrims thus provides a new method of considering the Pardoner as part of an overall whole rather than Kittredge’s “one lost soul” (180).

Arguments that focus more specifically on the Pardoner’s words as a starting point as opposed to his body include Anne McTaggart’s, which engages with affect theory in distinguishing the methodology and effectiveness of the Parson’s and the Pardoner’s sermonizing. The source material for the Parson’s sermon was to “loosen the tongues of sinners by evoking a precisely calibrated combination of fear, sorrow, and hope in its hearers or readers,” thus shaming and provoking them into feelings of guilt and true penance (116). In distinction, the Pardoner delivers a mock-penitential speech that he intends to use to “shame his audience into submission,” as does the Parson, and yet “ends up effecting the Pardoner’s own humiliation when the Host refuses his wares and exchanges one insult for another” (118). Ultimately, McTaggart argues that the final exchange between the Host and the Pardoner subverts the Pardoner’s power to shame and instead ostracizes him, an argument that provides an interesting methodology of exploring the Pardoner’s alleged shame, but one that relies on the claim that he is indeed ashamed of his own actions and not merely angry with the Host or the

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139 Joyce Peterson notes that the pilgrims’ laughter has been interpreted variously as “heartily, uneasily, derisively, cruelly, uncharitably, etc.” but that ultimately, “their laughter at the exchange must be directed, in part, to the Pardoner’s discomfiture which grows out of it” (327-28). Stockton’s more recent reading thus suggests the power of laughter to mend rather than to separate.
sudden turn in power dynamics. In a similar vein, David Lavinsky scrutinizes the Pardoner’s rhetoric, arguing that it is precisely the audience’s knowledge of the Pardoner’s self-proclaimed dishonesty that underscores his expertise in sermonizing, simultaneously emphasizing Chaucer’s interest in irony (441). Despite his self-proclaimed hypocrisy, the Pardoner’s use of fables and exempla to sermonize suggests the efficacious nature of literature, thus providing a method of examining the Pardoner that sets aside his embodiment and focuses on his manipulation of rhetoric. As I discuss above, Malo scrutinizes the Pardoner’s relics, rather than his embodiment, to suggest how he uses fragments to attract and instruct an audience. Thus, she finds the primary evidence for the Pardoner’s shortcomings to be located not in the body, but in his accoutrements, usefully shifting attention away from the body as symbol of morality—or lack thereof. Daniel Pigg departs from the Pardoner’s body altogether and focuses instead on his tale, placing it in the context of medieval masses for the dead; the Pardoner’s mock mass, he argues, would have resonated with late medieval Corpus Christi celebrations and Eucharistic superstitions (264), allowing the Tale to deconstruct its own orthodoxy and critique “the heart of medieval religiosity at the same time that it intends to reinforce it for [the Pardoner’s] personal aggrandizement” (276).

**Gendered Multiplicity and the Pardoner’s Personal Utopia**

I begin with a brief survey of criticism on the Pardoner’s “queer” body not to set a diagnostic tone for reading the Pardoner’s body in this chapter, but to set up both a foundation for my reading and a point of departure. Sturges claims ultimately that “the Pardoner’s gender identity signifies in too many ways,” and so I move to consider the Pardoner in the context of trans studies to consider some of the way that his allegedly excessive signification suggests
audience expectations for normativity (40). Reading the Pardoner in such a way is not to reclaim an identity for him or to exonerate him from charges of duplicity; rather, especially because of his resonance with contemporary stereotypical associations of trans identity and gendered performance with duplicity, criminality, and self-indulgence, I engage with trans studies to consider gendered policing and possibilities in the presentation of the Pardoner’s body and tale. Yet beyond gendered multiplicities, the Pardoner stands for the perverse possibility of an individualistic utopia that simultaneously bars its own entrance; a symbol of frustrated desire, his own desires are unattainable, gruesome to a Christian audience but perhaps appealing to base human instinct. As Cohen describes, “the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others” (“Monster Culture” 13). The Pardoner boasts of his own desires for food, drink, and overall material well-being—relatively reasonable desires, if not for his extreme excesses and his juggernautish approach to satisfying them at any cost, even if it means widows and children go hungry. He thus intimates the pleasure of indulgence and the simultaneous revulsion of excess and greed, and the personal utopia in which all material desires are satisfied verges on a dystopic vision of the impossibility of salvation. Anson Koch-Rein describes the utility of the monster, noting that “[t]ransgender studies, rather than refuting the attribution of monstrosity, has called for its embrace to restructure the world in such a way that it makes livable what is now deemed monstrous” (136). My consideration of the Pardoner in the context of trans studies, then, accepts that he represents monstrous ideals as he invites his audience into his perverse sermonizing; however, his ambiguously or ambivalently gendered body is not the cause or symbol of his moral depravity, but rather, symbolic of the perceptions of transgressively gendered identity and performance. Indeed, Sedgwick theorizes shame in “Queer Performativity,” arguing that to
inflict shame on someone is “unsanitizably redolent of that long Babylonian exile that is queer childhood” (4). While queer childhood and the Pardoner’s vices are two very different modes of being, perceptions of queer embodiment and performance position them both as subjects in need of conforming themselves to gendered categories to achieve viability. The Pardoner, then, is presented as a symbol of simultaneous desire and shame; he is, paradoxically, a symbol of the possibility for sating desire and yet also of the impossibility of salvation, as he renders himself alone in his dystopic desirous world, his invitation to join ultimately rejected by the Host.

It is clear that presentations and perceptions of the Pardoner can be characterized by shame and moral outrage. However, as I note above in relation to McTaggart’s discussion of guilt and shame in the Canterbury Tales, there is evidence that the Pardoner himself does not conceive of himself in terms of shame or moral outrage. To consider how the Pardoner himself might signify beyond the filter of shame or biases about embodiment, I begin on his own terms, that is, how Chaucer presents him presenting himself; reading outside of the poem’s chronological progression allows for a portrait of the Pardoner that is not filtered through the potentially sexed and gendered “geldying” or “mare” that the narrator suspects him to be. This suspicion, however, is rooted in the Pardoner’s self-presentation, and so beginning with the Pardoner himself can still suggest something about the nature of his gendered embodiment on his own terms, rather than filtered through the narrator. Indeed, even before the Pardoner introduces his own tale, he interrupts the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” to ask her about marriage, since he himself was apparently about to marry: “Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man, / And teche us yonge men of youre praktike” (III.186-87). Thus, while the Host suspects him of being a gelding or a mare, the Pardoner presents himself as a young man ripe for marriage.
Beyond this detail, he constructs his own platform for performance in the prologue and tale themselves. Indeed, he is most ostensibly a performer, combining acting and preaching as he self-consciously models his body for display and desire. A master exhibitionist, he attempts to dupe his audience into buying relics from him precisely by telling them that he’s duping them, making everyone complicit in his stunt. As Dinshaw argues,

He is exploiting their fetishistic ability to admire his oddity even while they refuse the practical consequences of their admission. They know (that he is sexually weird) but even so (they demand a ‘moral thyng’ from him). Their desire for an edifying tale is well described by this fetishistic logic: even out of the mouth of a ribald figure they insist that it will be a ‘moral thyng’; even though it is fiction, they will find it true. (“Eunuch” 42)

The audience’s simultaneously willing and extorted participation maps onto the very body of the Pardoner, which in turn marks his body as a symbol of that participation. He is simultaneously the seductive promise and the refusal to fulfill that promise; he forces us to monitor and question our own desires and to consider what it is those desires mean for us. As he reminds us over and over, “Radix malorum est cupiditas.” Greed is the root of all evil, and yet he displays that very greed in his performance; by extension, if his sales of relics and indulgences are to be successful, he also needs his audience to have greedy in their own sinfulness so that they can in turn desire absolution.

The introduction to his tale begins this cycle of wanting something that can’t be had, as the preceding “Physician’s Tale” is marked by loss and grief; after the Tale’s depiction of Virginius murdering his young daughter to avoid having to relinquish her to a forced marriage, the Host laments the cruelty of the tale and the idea that the daughter died because of her beauty.
Ultimately, the Host acknowledges the futility of resurrecting a dead literary character, and then quickly moves on to comforting himself:

‘… By corpus bones! but I have triacle,
Or elles a draughte of moyste and corny ale,
Or but I heere anon a myrie tale,
Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde.
Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner’, he sayde,
‘Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon.’ (VI.314-19)

The Host’s request for a merry tale to make up for the previous tragedy continues the overall pattern of highs followed by lows in the *Canterbury Tales*, and yet this specific variation on the pattern points to how the Pardoner becomes the placeholder for the Host’s discontents. Indeed, the request is for a merry or comical tale, and the Pardoner delivers—in a manner of speaking. The Host has asked that the Pardoner tell “som myrthe or japes right anon” to cast off the residual gloominess of the Physician’s tragic tale (VI.319). However, the pilgrims are seemingly put off by the Pardoner’s assertion that he will comply, but only after “here at this ale stake / I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake” (VI.321-22); they immediately protest, and demand, “lat hym telle us of no ribaudye! / Telle us som moral thing, that we may leere / Som wit, and thane wol we gladly heere” (VI.324-26). The contradiction between the desires of the Host and the pilgrims invites the question of how to categorize the “Pardoner’s Tale;” does the Pardoner give his audience a joke or a moral “thing”? Certainly, he seems compliant, as he agrees to their request, but as with his response to the Host, he follows up his agreement with the compromise that he will contemplate morality while drinking. Therein is the infamous paradox of the Pardoner and his tale— can a wicked person tell a moral story? He consistently positions himself
in a perverse christomimetic stance, promising salvation but provoking corporeal desires and the
desire to satiate them. Indeed, even the word “thing,” as broadly referential as it is, could have
euphemistically suggested genitalia; calling for a “moral thing,” then, might overtly express the
pilgrims’ call for an upright sermon despite coming from the mouth of a proclaimed hypocrite,
and yet it also might implicate the pilgrims in desiring something bawdy and tempting. Beyond
Dinshaw’s claim that they desire a moral tale despite knowing the Pardoner’s hypocrisy, they
might even desire an immoral tale, precisely because of the Pardoner’s penchant for the sinful.

Indeed, the Host has just lamented the pity of the “Physician’s Tale,” and then calls upon
the Pardoner, his fair or beautiful friend, his beel amy, to tell a comforting tale. The phrase beel
amy would have been used ironically to suggest not friendly intimacy, but knavery and
condescending contempt.\textsuperscript{140} It is telling that the Host conveys his contempt through a gendered
insult, suggesting immediately the Pardoner’s association with a suspiciously gendered and
perhaps feminine embodiment; not only does the narrator suspect him of being a “geldying or a
mare,” the Host, too, addresses him with an ambiguously gendered epithet. As Alistair Minnis
points out, “[d]espite the constant medieval elevation of spirit over flesh, biological sex was a
crucial factor in determining whether a person could hold public office or exercise authority over
others” (2). Before the Pardoner ever opens his mouth, then, he is figured not only as the
character who can tell a tale to save the pilgrims from their grief and despair, but also as the
character not to be trusted, inferior to both the Host and the remaining pilgrims, suspect in
character and embodiment alike. The Host invites him to speak while simultaneously
condemning him; it is as if the Host expects the Pardoner to toy with him, to give him “ribaudye”
and not the “myrthe and japes” he has requested, as he seems to know full well the extent of the
Pardoner’s delight in duplicity. Robert E. Nichols, Jr. even argues that the Pardoner’s insistence
\textsuperscript{140} Middle English Dictionary, bēl-amī (a) and (b).
that he drink and eat of a cake before telling his tale functions as a reference to the Eucharist, thus emphasizing the irony of the character and his tale (498-99). Nichols claims that by “arguing that such refreshment is necessary if he is to think of an appropriate story, [the Pardoner] insures acceptance of his demands by making the alestake refection a qualification for telling the moral thing required by the gentles,” finishing his Introduction on the issue of food and drink as he looks forward to fulfilling the terms of the agreement (500).

The ambivalence of characterizing the Pardoner’s tale as either a joke or a moral story becomes, then, a matter of perspective; he preaches that greed is the root of all evil but then mocks that message as he blatantly tells his audience that he’s manipulating them to feed his own greed. Yet along with the overt message of hypocrisy, the Pardoner sells the veneer of salvation, intimating absolution through the bait of a spiritual indulgence, promising forgiveness and encouraging corporeal indulgence. Robert Jungman compares the paradox of moral truth in the mouth of an immoral man to a paradox Augustine sought to resolve in *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which he said that a wicked person can still preach a righteous truth (16-17). Indeed, Thomas Aquinas too argued that the power to confer grace belongs to Christ, who works through the minister as an instrument.\textsuperscript{141} This was not, however, the contemporary opinion of preachers, which held that a preacher must himself be of upstanding moral character (*Riverside* 907 n.407-08). As Minnis argues, a pastor would have owed his flock devotion and morality, not just rhetorical expertise in preaching; yet if a preacher kept his sins private and the congregation was not aware of any transgressions, there was far less cause for concern, as it was most important to maintain the image of upstanding morality (17-18).\textsuperscript{142} The Pardoner’s revelation of his self-

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\textsuperscript{141} Minnis synthesizes this argument, (14-15).
\textsuperscript{142} Minnis also points out that given the Pardoner’s transgressions of his very office—acting as preacher while not licensed to do so—further complicate questions of his reliability. While the full extent of these questions is beyond
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conscious hypocrisy, then, has been coloring his tale from the moment he speaks, as he follows both the Host’s and the pilgrims’ invitations to speak with the declarations that he merely will perform morality while, in reality, he indulges in food and drink. Thus, he may undermine the preaching of morality, but he does, in a roundabout way, fulfill the pilgrims’ specific request to “leere / Som wit” (VI.325-26). That wit turns out to be not spiritual knowledge, but the Pardoner’s reflections of human corporeal desire; as he becomes characterized by vice, the audience can see the image of desire epitomized as greed, the possibility that their own desires could just as well become similar to the Pardoner’s. The unresolvable nature of the tale’s thematic question, whether a wicked person can tell a moral tale, hovers throughout the Pardoner’s sermonizing—if it truly can be called such—while the pilgrims must wrestle with questions not just of the Pardoner’s morality, but their own.

Indeed, Alfred Kellogg argues that the Pardoner embodies the Augustinian concept of sin; turning away from God and seeking pleasure in his own sinfulness, the Pardoner pushes himself further and further away from divine salvation as sin feeds upon sin (465-81). I build on this concept in reading how he places himself in the position of a perverse version of Christ, an image to be imitated. Rather than just sell relics for his own material gain, the Pardoner can revel in drawing in the pilgrims as members of his self-indulgent flock; inviting the pilgrims to give in to their desires, he ensures that they will continue participating in a never-ending process of giving in to sinful human nature and then begging for forgiveness before inevitably giving in again. Even within Genesis, the proliferation of humankind results both from God’s creation and from human sins, leading to the development of the seemingly paradoxical idea of the felix culpa; sin is a necessary and, somehow, desirable function of life on earth. As Augustine writes,
“For God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist” (trans. Outler viii). Indeed, this dynamic is similar to that of Albina and her sisters, discussed in Chapter One; without capitulating to the desire for sinful acts, there would be no need for salvation or pardon, and without an innately sinful human nature, there would be no constant pressure for the perfection attainable only through salvation. Indeed, Jordan, Burrus, and MacKendrick write that “the disobedient will strives to create divinely because it wants to be as like God’s will as possible, imitating divine freedom by rebellion… Disobedience inadvertently honors by imitation” (71).

The Pardoner indeed imitates God’s will, albeit perversely, as he performs the role of holy man leading his flock while simultaneously encouraging the flock to give in to their corporeal desires. Read alongside Augustine, though, this submission to the Pardoner’s seductions would allow them constantly to strive for perfection. The tale the Pardoner tells, in and of itself, is not a merry one, nor is it comical; despite having potential elements of jocularity or humor, the tale’s debatable genre as sermon or ruse, warning or parody, means that the pilgrims’ request for a merry tale is met with simultaneous provocation and frustration of their desires. The Pardoner, consistently banking on his perverse christomimetic stance to perform his role as a pardoner, invites his audience members into becoming his congregation, inspiring an indulgent idealism that positions salvation as corporeal attainment. According to his system, sating corporeal desires necessitates forgiveness, which he promises with the sale of relics and indulgences; getting closer to his God is the commodified process of sinning and then buying forgiveness, distancing the self to work harder to regain closeness. Setting the example, he warns them that while he agrees, he “moot thynke / Upon som honest thing while that [he] drynke,” thus setting up the paradox of the tale and further emphasizing his perverse christomimetic

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143 Ed. Krabinger: [“Melius enim iudicavit de malis benefacere, quam mala nulla esse permettere”] (VIII.27).
stance as his actions parody the transubstantiation of the Eucharist (VI.327-28). The governing question of his tale revolves around the issue of whether an immoral man can tell a moral tale, and certainly he, hypocritically drunk and lewd, delivers a moral tale. It is both the promised joke and a refusal to grant the promised joke; the difference, then, lies in audience perception. As Glenn Burger argues, the Pardoner’s significance lies in how his “efforts to assert identity—his transgressive desire—mirror ours” (“Kissing” 1145-46). As we know from listening to the narrator’s descriptions of the other characters, most of them would love nothing more than to indulge in the sinfully revelrous activities against which he preaches, all the while telling them that he has no plans for temperance or moderation. Greed might be the root of all evil, but the Pardoner forces his listeners to confront the root of evil that the pilgrims all share.

As he begins his prologue, he instructs his audience in his art of manipulation, exposing to them the tricks of his game; that is, the “wit” that he imparts to the other pilgrims is the art of manipulation. The Pardoner both embodies and mirrors human greed, as he champions his own desires as justification for his performance. Yet he also embodies and mirrors human curiosity about, and even desire for, his atypically and ambiguously sexed and gendered body, in all its possibilities for difference. He makes this desire ostensibly clear when he instructs his listeners exactly how he manipulates his body to maximize the effect of his preaching and then takes them step by step through the routine of his sermon, pronouncing his theme for the first time in his own words: “My theme is alwey oon, and evere was— / Radix malorum est Cupiditas” (VI.333-34). How, then, does he suggest the pilgrims deal with what they want, so that their desires don’t become the cardinal sin of greed? He gives his audience the easy answers: simply buy his indulgences and receive his pardon. Yet in buying his indulgences, they give in to their own greed, to their own desires to have an excuse to keep enjoying their sinful delights, since the
Pardoner will sell them a way out of purgatory anyway. This points, then, to the Pardoner’s aspirations for an embodied attraction between him and his audience; drawn in by how his body inspires and frustrates greed, the audience would intimate a desire for that very body.

As the Pardoner uses his own body as a pedagogical tool, the narrator’s physical descriptions of the Pardoner’s body play a significant role in the symbolism of his indulgence-selling ruse. As I discuss above, the Pardoner immediately turns his storytelling platform into a stage on which his body can take the spotlight, demonstrating to his audience how he manipulates his voice and his posturing to draw in his audience, raising his voice to “rynge it out as round as gooth a belle” (VI.331). This is the same voice that the narrator, in the “General Prologue,” describes as being “as small as hath a goot” (I.688). Steven Kruger emphasizes the importance of physicality to the Pardoner’s self-presentation, as “[n]one of the other male pilgrims, and only the Wife of Bath among the women, describes him- or herself in such strongly physical terms, and as so clearly the object of the public gaze” (132). In addition to the physical description of the high-pitched whinny of the Pardoner’s voice, the goat imagery points to the Pardoner’s association with wickedness and lechery. As David Siddle points out, for “the Jews and early Christians the goat was the repository of sin – the ‘scapegoat’ – a creature to be cast into outer darkness, a representative of evil to be divided from the lambs of God” (528). Indeed, Bartholomaeus Anglicus and John of Trevisa portray the goat as a lecherous beast, a characteristic which the Pardoner proudly claims for himself (Barth. Angl. 18.24, tr. Trevisa 2:1163). Every detail of the Pardoner seems constructed to emphasize his alterity and moral ambiguity—if not outward immorality—through the lens of his ambivalently gendered body. If the Pardoner, like the goat, is a repository of sin, then this detail specifically emphasizes how his
embodiment reflects the immorality of all the pilgrims, and their discomfort with his alterity is a manifestation of their own guilt.

*The Pardoner’s Place in the Pilgrimage*

Until this point, I have read the Pardoner on his own terms, how he positions himself during his introduction to his tale. While such a reading is important in terms of the Pardoner’s self-presentation, it also takes for granted that his ruse is successful, that he is the excellent pardoner that he claims to be. Indeed, when read solely on their own terms, individual characters become removed from the context of the pilgrimage and their relationship to the other characters. As the Pardoner begins telling his tale, it is important to place him in the context of the *Tales* overall; this is not to revert to essentialized readings of the Pardoner’s allegedly biological queerness, but rather, to consider alternative possibilities for his simultaneous alterity and similarity. Indeed, the Pardoner’s tale openly invites audience participation, as he enacts the performative sermonizing that he described in his prologue and thus situates the other pilgrims as a pseudo-congregation. In moving chronologically backwards from the Pardoner’s self-presentation in his prologue to the overall context of the *Canterbury Tales*, I aim to balance individual self-presentation with a consideration of the overall group dynamic and external characterizations of the Pardoner. Further, perceptions of the Pardoner alongside his self-presentation are key for my engagement with the tale through context of trans studies. As Heather Love describes, trans studies “makes accounting for material experience and making space for new forms and experiences of embodiment central” (174). In shifting to the Pardoner in the context of how he is perceived by others, his uniquely ambiguous embodiment among the pilgrims suggests the many ways that gendered bodies can be seen to signify meaning. He is
preacher and deceiver in his sermonizing, pardoner in his sale of indulgences and condemnor in his invitation to sin with him, gelding, mare, outspoken heterosexual, both ambivalent and ambiguous in his gendered significations, and more; the broad range of interpretations in terms of both how he presents himself and how he is perceived warrants acknowledgment both of his sinfulness and monstrosity and also of his symbolic potential for desiring more, futile though those desires may be.  

To return to the Pardoner’s location within the pilgrimage, Dinshaw has argued that “[a] penetrative act that fosters generation is imaged in the inaugural moment of the *Canterbury Tales,*” as April’s sweet showers pierce the droughts of March and usher in a season of fertility (*Getting Medieval* 119). These famous opening lines, she argues, have led to Chaucer’s reputation as the father of English poetry and “to the scholarly establishment of a tradition of English literature consonant with larger heterosexualized literary structures” (*Getting Medieval* 121). Yet, with Dinshaw, this overtly heterosexualized framework suggests the continual correlations of normative and queer; that is, the *Tales*’ images of normative genders and sexualities not only resonate with their queer counterparts but also reveal how “all that is unkynde” resides within normative structures and relations (*Getting Medieval* 121). Indeed, the *Tales*’ famous opening lines describing a particularly fertile time of year lead into an account of what people like to do at that time: “Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages, / And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes, / To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes” (I.12-14). Thus, while nature allegedly sets the tone for heteronormative desires and structures, people are struck with wanderlust. The comfortable weather, rather than encouraging everyone to stay put and reproduce, leads to people longing for *something else,* for the “straunge strondes” and “sondry londes,” perhaps even the strange allure of the body of the Pardoner and the tale he might tell.
This desire for something other than what is comfortable and familiar resonates with the intertwined pattern of queer desires within normative structures as the narrator launches into his descriptions of the individual people who make up the troop of pilgrims whose stories will pass the time on the way to Canterbury.

Indeed, the pilgrims all have their own foibles and flaws, their own predilections toward the sin and alterity for which the Pardoner’s body becomes the scapegoat and placeholder. The narrator has already outlined in the “General Prologue” the sins for which they must be pardoned. Even the Knight, representative of the royal group and emblematic of chivalric and militaristic masculinity, is “as meeke as is a mayde” (69). While meekness and humility together with his virility and prowess on the battlefield would have been positive characteristics for a royal character such as a knight, the description of maiden-like meekness affords a subtle but significant hint of queerness to the Knight; his masculinity is not complete without a touch of femininity. Another example would be the Monk, who loves hunting and is “[a] manly man, to been an abbot able” (I.167). While his hypocrisy as a religious man is clear, as he dismisses the teachings of Saints Augustine, Maurus, and Benedict in favor of his own hedonism, his particular association with hunting intimates a potentially sodomitical side to the Monk: “He yaf not of that text a pulled hen, / That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men” (I.177-78). Gower attributed the love of hunting to a fault that took monastic officers away from the duties of the monastery itself (Mirour 20953-21158). Paull F. Baum finds a pun on the Monk’s love of “venerie” with sexual activity, although the OED’s first-recorded instance of the pun is not until nearly one hundred years later in 1497 (245-46). Yet even without the explicit association of “venerie” with sexual activity, John of Salisbury in 1159 banks on anti-sodomitical and misogynist rhetoric in one fell swoop in his critique of hunting, as he rails against the hunting tradition allegedly begun by the
Athenians: “Perhaps a goddess was chosen to preside over hunting because the people did not wish to degrade their gods by making them preside over an activity characterized by self-indulgence and vice” (I.iv.21-22). Distinguishing between hunting for necessary nutritional purposes and hunting for recreation and pleasure, John associates hunting for pleasure with sodomy, which, in his view, is solely for self-indulgence rather than any practical purpose; hunting takes men out of their rightful places in society, away from the political and domestic realm, thus leading, like sodomy, to the dissolution of the family unit and society itself. The Monk, then, does not necessarily reject the association of hunters with immorality; he just doesn’t give a hen.

Indeed, the remainder of the pilgrims have their own share of sinful predilections as well; the Squire gets barely any sleep because he’s so busy singing, dancing, and sleeping with women, just what the Pardoner says he himself loves to do (I.95-98). The Prioress takes pains to “countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere, / And to ben holden digne of reverence,” embodying the same alleged hypocrisy often associated with the Pardoner (I.139-41). The Monk unabashedly “lovede venerie” (I.166) and dresses in the finest of clothing (I.193-97), marked not only by sinful indulgence but also by the same sodomitical qualities of the descriptions of the Pardoner’s body. The Friar, like the Pardoner, seems to live vicariously through inserting himself into other’s sexual affairs, as he “hadde maad ful many a mariage / Of yonge wommen at his owene cost” (I.212-13). The Sergeant of the Law joins the ranks of hypocritical characters, as “[n]owher so bisy a man as he ther nas, / And yet he semed bisier than he was” (I.321-22). The Franklin seems to be the very embodiment of everything the Pardoner desires, considering that he is described as “Epicurus owene sone” (I.336). The Cook, besides working in a profession that the Pardoner rails against for its role in overindulgence, has “on his
shyne a mormal,” intimating through his very embodiment, like the Pardoner, his apparent moral shortcomings (I.386). The Shipman lines his own pockets by stealing drafts of wine while the merchant sleeps (I.396-97), and the Physician lines his pockets by collaborating with apothecaries to exploit his patients (I.425-28), both like the Pardoner in duping others for their own material gains. The Wife of Bath infamously exudes excess and indulgence, wearing ten pounds of handkerchiefs along with the finest of clothing (I.453-57) and having had five husbands and numerous other boyfriends (I.460-61). The Miller is “a janglere and a golierdeys, / And that was moost of synne and harlotries,” a description foreshadowing his intoxication while telling his tale, an intoxication which the Pardoner consistently reminds his audience will destroy a soul but which he desires nonetheless (I.560-61). The Manciple, like the Pardoner, seems to be very good at his job, but in the end, “this Manciple sette hir aller cappe” (I.586). The Reeve is intimidated to be prone to anger, governed by his choleric disposition, just as the Pardoner is intimidated to by governed by his humoral imbalances (I.587). The Summoner, too, manipulates his position within the church for his own personal gain, aping mastery of Latin (I.646) and indulging in wine however he can (I.649-51). Indeed, the Pardoner is described as “his freend and his compeere,” leaving seemingly no question as to their connection (I.670).

The queerness of the pilgrims is not something that has been devoid of critical attention in the past; indeed, Dinshaw and Glenn Burger have both written extensively on the elements of queerness undergirding the image of the normative group. In revisiting these moments that disrupt a homogenous reading of the Canterbury group, I read the Pardoner not as Kittredge’s “utterly abandoned wretch,” but rather, very much like the pilgrims with whom he stands at odds (21). In reading through reactions to his alleged difference, from the pilgrims, the Host, and critics alike, I suggest that his apparently differently gendered and sexed body functions as a lens
through which to desire seeing difference. Indeed, the Host’s descriptions of the Pardoner emphasize his alterity in terms of gender and sexuality, and yet his performance of the sale of relics and indulgences is designed specifically to draw in customers, to attract them to the ruse of his show. So, based on his purported success rates, whether his audiences see him as something different, he certainly postures himself as a desirable commodity, implicitly encouraging sinfulness in others so that they might avail themselves of his wares and services; he boasts, “But though myself be gilty in that synne [of avarice], / Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice and soore to repente” (VI.429-31). The saving of souls is, of course, not the Pardoner’s aim, as he is quick to remind us, but merely part of his sales pitch to sate his greed, as he boasts by the end of his prologue:

I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
Al sholde hir children sterve for famine.
Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne
And have a joly wenche in every toun. (VI.447-53)

It is important to notice, however, that the Pardoner does not speak in terms of his actual success rates, but rather, in terms of the success that he desires—money, clothing, food, liquor, and mistresses aplenty. He repeats “I wol” throughout the list of these objects of desire, reiterating not the attainment of these items, but the process of continually desiring without receiving, again placing himself within the process of continually stimulating and frustrating desire. Indeed, by the end of his tale, he has not successfully lured the pilgrims into his purse but instead fully
repulsed the Host and discomfited the pilgrims, getting the opposite reaction of what he set out to do; unlike Muñoz’s queer utopia, the Pardoner’s vision for indulgence does not come to fruition, remaining statically in the realm of continual and self-perpetuating desire. While the Pardoner has been characterized as the “lost soul” or the embodiment of difference, he instead illuminates human motivations and fallible desires, as the weaknesses and sinful predilections attributed to the other pilgrims are made glaringly apparent in the frank immorality of the Pardoner. He then goes on to tell his tale, using his physical presence as an ostentatious focal point to construct the context for his story and mapping his frank immorality onto his own embodiment.

Given his physical descriptions from the “General Prologue” and the way that he calls attention to his own body parts, paying attention to his physical embodiment suggests how he himself uses his body to symbolize and to sell; this self-symbolization simultaneously disembodies him and reifies his embodiment. As Susan Stryker describes the biopolitical power ascribed to and inherent in gendered subjectivity:

[Gender] is a system filled with habits and traditions, underpinned by ideological, religious, and scientific supports that all conspire to give bodies the appearance of a natural inevitability, when in fact embodiment is a highly contingent and reconfigurable artifice that coordinates a particular material body with a particular biopolitical apparatus. (39)

In other words, the body of the Pardoner is both disembodied symbol and embodied subject, a contradiction navigated by his unique position of an ambiguously gendered character. While I

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145 On the nature of hope and desire as futile or pragmatic, José Esteban Muñoz describes Ernst Bloch’s view that abstract utopias “falter … because they are untethered from any historical consciousness” (3). Concrete utopias, meanwhile, “are the realm of educated hope” (3). Muñoz contends that queerness is “primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always on the horizon” (11). I certainly do not classify the Pardoner’s incessant desires as Muñoz’s queer utopia, as the Pardoner’s interests lie only with himself in the here-and-now, and decidedly not in the future. And yet his desire for more, evidenced in his “Y wol” speech (VI.441-53), places him in a frustrated cycle of hoping and wanting but, unlike Muñoz, never having real hope for arriving anywhere other than his present desires.
am not interested in claiming a trans subjectivity for the Pardoner—and nor is such a claim useful—his navigation of embodiment suggests modes of maneuvering economic power and materiality. When the narrator describes the appearance that the Pardoner will soon go on to flaunt, he spends nine lines describing his long, smooth, flaxen tresses (I.675-83) and describes his eyes as being “glarynge…as an hare” (I.684). Indeed, clerics were not permitted to have long hair, and the archbishop of Canterbury in 1342 sermonized against fancy clothing and long hair such as the Pardoner’s, as such men “mak[e] themselves conspicuous by hair spreading almost to the shoulders in feminine fashion” (qtd. Hamilton 60). Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus notes that the hare was associated with hermaphroditism: “it is yseid that he gendreth withoute bothe male and hath both sexus, male and femele” (qtd. Riverside 824-25 n. 684). Further, John Boswell points to Clement of Alexandria and Alexander of Neckam in demonstrating how the hare was associated with anal intercourse (137-38, 142, 253, 306).

However, what exactly makes his body ostentatious cannot be assumed to be limited to his allegedly ambivalently gendered body; as Malo reminds us, there are more lines describing his relics than lines describing his body, and the Pardoner himself tells us that he manipulates his body to inspire the audience’s desires and to feed his own greed. As Palemon notes in the Ashmole version of the Secretum secretorum notes, long hair also could have symbolized “untechable and wild maners … And the thynner the heeres ben, the more gileful, sharp, ferfyll, and of wynnyng covetous, it sheweth” (92). Further, he posits that glaring eyes could have

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146 In Corinthians 11:14, Paul rhetorically asks, “Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?” Troy Martin synthesizes classical concepts of men’s hair, referring to Hippocrates’ claim that men have more semen, which their hotter bodies circulate throughout their bodies (Nat. puer. 20, qtd. 78) and to Aristotle’s claim that “[d]uring intercourse, semen has to fill all the hollow hairs on its way from the male brain to the genital area” (Probl. 893b.10-17, qtd. 78). Thus, long-haired men retain most of their semen, as their long hair draws it away from the genital area and toward the head’s hair, preventing them from ejaculating. While my reading of the Pardoner resists medicalized examination of alleged symptoms of deficiency, such medical and biblical connotations with long-haired men certainly would class the Pardoner as sexually impotent or at least deficient.
indicated “a man given to folly, a glutton, a libertine, and a drunkard” (qtd. Curry 57). Thus, while the body of the Pardoner certainly seems to represent ambivalently gendered characteristics, these characteristics represent myriad other transgressions and possibilities, not strictly atypical embodiment in and of itself. He consciously manipulates his own body as a “contingent and reconfigurable artifice,” working to signify his own brand of salvation—indulgence and release in the here and now, regardless of future consequences (Stryker 39).

One of the main questions, then, is not just what the audience sees when they watch the Pardoner, but what they desire while indulging in the spectacle of his sermon. Do they want to be pardoned from their sins and granted easier access to heaven, or do they want to be granted easier access to wanton behaviors on earth, knowing they can buy a pardon to cancel out the black mark on their soul? Does the Pardoner effectively use or even transform his body into an image, however deceitful, of absolution, or does he manipulate his preaching to arouse the predilections of the pilgrim audience towards the seven deadly sins? Indeed, despite the pilgrims’ request that he tell them “no ribaudye,” their specific request for a “moral thynge” could connote the very ribaldry they claim to reject. Whatever the case for what individual pilgrims desire or if the Pardoner is to be successful in this moment of manipulation, the Pardoner continues to flaunt his apparent transparency, inviting trust in his version of salvation while frustrating possibility for a Christian salvation. This stance of perverse christomimesis positions him almost as mimicking the cross-dressing saints, albeit in the same perverse configuration that allows him to act Christ-like; while the cross-dressing saints use positions of masculinity to exercise greater autonomy over their own spirituality, the Pardoner uses positions of transgressively gendered embodiment to exercise indulgence in his own corporeality, which is, for him, tantamount to a religious experience. This performance is key to his manipulation of audiences, as his own
success as a pardoner requires the participation of an audience to follow his example of capitulation to desire followed by the request for forgiveness. Indeed, it’s a forgiveness that he himself repudiates, and a shallow one at that, limited to desiring indulgence and not absolution. He indulges in the hedonistic listing of his own desires shortly before conceding that the pilgrims aren’t there to listen to his obsessions, but rather, to hear a story; following his famous lines about drinking plenty of wine and having a wench in every town (VI.452-53), he halts and redirects:

\[
\text{But herkneth, lordynges, in conclusioun:}\\
\text{Youre liking is that I shal telle a tale.}\\
\text{Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,}\\
\text{By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng}\\
\text{That shal by reson been at youre likyng. (VI.454-58)}
\]

True to his word, he wraps up his prefatory remarks and begins his tale. Yet he concludes by acknowledging that the pilgrims desire a tale and by hoping that he will tell a tale that, by reason, will be at their liking. His rhetoric suggests that he is adept at reading the desires of people around him, as is indeed an important skill for his profession and his perverse spirituality. Their desires might be for the Pardoner to deliver not “ribaudye” (VI.324) but “som moral thyng, that we may leere / Som wit” (VI.325-26), but the Pardoner delivers his own morals, teaching them that the way to salvation is through indulging in desire and then asking for forgiveness, again and again.

Despite the Pardoner’s frankly gloating about his honest hypocrisy, his tale is marked by ambiguity and open-endedness. He promises a moral tale and indeed delivers, yet the tale is driven by greed. He himself desires wine, but drinks ale. He tells us his theme is always that
grief is the root of all evil, but he seems to be marked instead by a constant bait-and-switch as
his sermon tempts the audience to indulge in sins and then ask for forgiveness via purchasing a
pardon. This thematic deceit marks his embodied performance, too, as audiences believe that
they are seeing a preacher but really see a con artist. The Host muses that his masculinity, too, is
suspect, thus driving criticism pointing out that his sexuality and gender presentation are
symbolic of his overall moral corruption. As he prefaces his tale with the request that the
pilgrims study his body for evidence of his manipulations, his tale marks the crux of his
performative gestures, as he takes them all for a ride; he promises a moral tale, but delivers what
might make the listeners all complicit in his deception. After all, the narrator has already told
readers of the tale that “thus, with feyned flatterye and japes, / He made the person and the peple
his apes” (I.705-06). There is, of course, no guarantee that the Pardoner’s feigned flattery and
tricks cease when he begins his tale, despite his promise that he delivers a moral tale and indeed,
he never promises that his tale won’t verge into a sermon and thus another iteration of his wiles.
The Pardoner’s instruction to his audience to meditate on his body while he tells either a moral
tale or a joke suggests the importance of reading of his embodied symbolism; these
christomimetic moments pose the Pardoner not as the Lamb of God, sacrificed to atone for the
sins of humankind, but rather as a tempting display of the pleasurable indulgences available
precisely because of sin.

The Pardoner’s Promises: Questioning Salvation through His Tale

While all the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales are introduced in the same way—first, on
the narrator’s terms in the “General Prologue,” next, by the Host Harry Bailly in their respective
tales’ introductions, and finally, on their own terms in the tales themselves—the presentation of
the Pardoner is unique in terms of his ambiguity. I have already addressed the way that the Pardoner presents himself and the ways that the narrator and the host have introduced and reacted to him, and so now I consider the Tale itself; such a comparative move clarifies how the Tale the Pardoner tells functions in the simultaneous stimulation, indulgence, and frustration of corporeal desire. A sermon-like presentation of an exemplum, the Tale’s central focus is the attempt on the part of the three rioters to kill Death, an endeavor that stimulates their own greed and leads to their deaths at each other’s hands. Following the prologue’s self-conscious presentation of the performativity of his sermonizing, the Pardoner’s Tale depicts the religious economics of profit and penance, thus oscillating between the serious and the salacious, the somber and the parodic.

Fortuitously focused on three young party-goers in Flanders, the Tale immediately engages with all the sinful activities that the Pardoner has told his audience he loves; they “eten …and drynken over hir myght” (VI.468) and “[o]ure blissed Lordes body…totere” (VI.473) with their words, just as the Pardoner loves plenty of food and drink, all bought at the price of figuratively tearing apart the body of Christ to sell relics, albeit false ones. They share the company of young dancing girls (“tombesteres,” VI.477), girls who sell fruit (“frutesteres,” VI.478), and pimps (“baudes,” VI.489), all of which would enable the Pardoner’s desire for “a joly wenche in every toun” (VI.453). The excess of the opening descriptions of the Tale seems almost to parallel the Pardoner’s own excessive desires, and according to the demands of the “moral tale,” sets up the inevitable ending in which these excesses consume and destroy the three young rioters. The Pardoner, too, is consumed with desire, having just listed all the things that he wants, and fully intends to acquire through the money he takes from his followers (VI.443-53). By the end of his Tale, he is effectively silenced after the Host and the Knight have the last
words, and his voice disappears from the Tales. Yet unlike the rioters, his greed is transparent, dependent on the participation of his audience and the perpetuation of their continual greed; with no desire for pardons or indulgences, with no need for absolution, the Pardoner would be alone with his desires and have no means with which to sate them. One of the main problems with considering the possibility for the Tale to endorse the Pardoner’s subtle encouragement of self-indulgence is the death of the rioters because of their greed; indeed, the Pardoner has promised a moral tale, and so the rioters’ immoral actions must be punished to demonstrate that greed is the root of all evil. The Pardoner’s cycle of desire, capitulation, and absolution depends on a fear of being damned, a fear which he claims not to have. The story of the rioters drives home the point that indulgence, hypocrisy, and deceit inevitably lead to spiritual death. Yet the Pardoner uses this story to manipulate an audience into buying into his system of corporeal indulgence, thus fueling the motivation for the sale of pardons. His simultaneous endorsement of his own indulgent lifestyle combined with the moralizing tale provides the audience with an appealing formula of the pleasures of indulgence and the means for assuaging guilt before it is too late; short of inviting pilgrims to join him in his categorical rejection of Christian morals, which would do nothing for inspiring his sales, his tale provides a way out.

By listing gambling, brothels, taverns, music, dancing, dicing, oath-making, swearing, and excessive eating and drinking, the Pardoner mends the rift between his prologue and his story, continuing his indulgence in describing those sins which he constantly desires. Yet in obfuscating the clear divide between prologue and story, he forces the audience to consider at what point his self-indulgence ends and his apparently moral story begins, dragging them along into a space of ambiguity that, like his own body, cannot be categorized.\textsuperscript{147} Of course, he is

\textsuperscript{147} The Wife of Bath similarly indulges in her own desires during her prologue, boasting that “An housbonde I wol have – I wol nat lette – / Which shal be bothe my detour and my thral, / And have his tribulacion withal / Upon his
careful to tag on the point that the items on this list are actions “[t]hugh which they doon the
devel sacrificse / Withinne that devesle temple in cursed wise / By superfluytee abhomynable”
(VI.469-71). This abominable superfluity seems to continue, as the Pardoner indulges in similar
sermonizing for nearly two hundred lines; while his speech certainly engages in effective
moralizing rhetoric, the ostentatious display of his deception renders the message another one of
his abominable superfluities.

Following the wanton tavern scene, the Pardoner dramatically sermonizes about
indulgent behavior in a series of condemnatory vignettes. Given the weaknesses and desires of
the overall group of pilgrims, the sweeping damnations of the Pardoner’s litany against sinful
activities could be geared toward any one of them, including, of course, himself. His distinction
between narrator and tale, however, vindicates him from damnation, at least according to his
own logic, as he conceives of the tale as mere words and his sermon as an act. His transparency
with his audience about the double standard he keeps for himself allows, then, for the possibility
that they too could become willing participants in the perpetuation of greed and desire. All the
Pardoner’s desires throughout the course of his tale remain in a space of stasis, if not total
un fulfillment; while the Host repudiates the Pardoner’s advances, none of the other pilgrims are
shown reacting either positively or negatively. His litany of evildoing, to which his audience is
supposed to react repentantly, includes, of course, nearly continuous hypocrisies, and yet one
sinful activity seems to underscore the Pardoner’s relationship between his body and his speech:
“The hooly writ take I to my witnesse / That luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse” (VI.483-84).
His audience already should be acutely aware of his apparently inebriated state, and of his

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flesh, whil that I am his wyf” (III.154-57). The Wife is notoriously larger than life, boasting of her numerous
husbands and her numerous pilgrimages, and yet what distinguishes the Pardoner’s excess from the Wife’s is the
way that his gendered embodiment, as Sturges notes, signifies in too many directions; the Wife is, for all her excess,
hypertrophically a female figure.
predilection for both wine and lechery. However, now the Pardoner has linked the two
inextricably; lechery is the essential outcome of wine and drunkenness. Having taken an oath on
the Bible that lechery is the essential outcome of excessive drink, the Pardoner should be lodging
himself further and further into the ranks of the hypocritical. Yet, the fact that he has sworn an
oath linking the two sins does not ever translate to him saying that he won’t sin; indeed, he
flaunts his knowledge of his own moral damnation and then continues to obsess over sins of the
body and what the body can do. Indeed, while railing against each of the cardinal sins, he veers
onto the topic of gluttony and points his finger at “Thise cooke, how they stampe, and streyne,
and grynge, / And turnen substaunce into accident / To fulfille al thy likerous talent!” (VI.538-
40). By turning “substance” into “accident,” the cooks’ work parodies the transubstantiation. As
Jill Mann notes, the terms allude to Aristotelian philosophy, which held that a physical body’s
accident are its characteristics such as color or shape and that its substance is the sum total. In the
later Middle Ages, the terms were used to describe the transubstantiation (Penguin Canterbury
Tales 971 n. 538-40). Paul Strohm notes that because John Wyclif rejected the theory of
transubstantiation, the terms “substance” and “accident” would have been controversial at the
time (23-42). The cooks, like the Pardoner, labor to transform material into a vehicle for the
sating of desire; the cooks serve up platters of food while the Pardoner offers up his own body to
invite his audience to indulge in the decadence of their own pleasurably sinful predilections.
After all, the audience can always kiss his relics and save their souls; his body has been
transformed for palatable consumption.

While his hundreds-of-lines-long sermon on the dangers of cardinal sins, and specifically
the tavern sins, engages with ideas of embodiment, the discussions of sins that include
consuming the body of another take on a particular relevance for the Pardoner; given his location
in the spotlight, he, too, is consumed by audience and critics as he continues his christomimetic posturing. Especially given the connotations of a parodic transubstantiation as the cooks change substance into accident, the Pardoner’s sermon consistently verges on issues of embodiment and consumption. He instructs the audience that those who follow their stomachs and not God face certain death: “O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod, / Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun! / At either ende of thee foul is the soun” (VI.534-36). The intertwining of death and appetite marks one of the Pardoner’s thematic concerns as he continues sermonizing on his way to eventually delivering a story; portrayed as viscerally discernable from the other characters, distinct in his queer body, he can represent the figure of indulgence through which the others live vicariously—joined to him by sharing the same desires but appearing to laugh off his hypocrisy, thus rendering themselves the images of good citizens. Indeed, his obsession with the chefs’ allegedly perverse transformations is followed by a sumptuous menu and a detailed description of the delights of eating, filtered though it may be through the guise of sermonizing:

-Out of the harde bones knokke they
  The mary, for they caste noght awey
  That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.
  Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote
  Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
  To make hym yet a newer appetit.
  But, certes, he that haunteth swiche delices
  Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices. (VI.541-48)

While some might interpret the cooks’ actions as frugal, using up every possible part of the animal and letting nothing go to waste, the Pardoner uses the context of the sermon to portray the
greed inherent in such actions. Yet the Pardoner often sermonizes in just this manner, lingering on the details of the sins and emphatically reminding his audience of their evils, yet simultaneously veering into a rhapsody of his own desire; he condemns that which he has told the pilgrims he loves for the effect of the sermon, thus implicitly allowing him to linger on the aesthetic images of the sins he describes. Indeed, he has reminded his audience twice in his prologue that he preaches nothing but greed, as first, he makes his intentions clear: “[S]hortly myn entente I wol devyse: / I preche of no thyng but for coveityse” (VI.423-24). With no real means of sating his desires, he lingers on them verbally, indulging only as he speaks. So often scrutinized in terms of his excessive signifiers, the Pardoner here reconfigures speech as a vehicle of intimating Muñoz’s utopia; however, his utopia remains an inaccessible fantasy, tainted as it is with sin.

He then goes on to say that while he himself is guilty of greed, he can still inspire others to give up their own greed and repent (VI.425-31); yet of course that isn’t his main concern, and he reiterates, “that is nat my principal entente; / I preche nothyng but for coveitise” (VI.432-33). His intent, then, invites his listeners to sin along with him and to join him in covetousness, buying pardons and relics to circumvent the hard work of penance. Finally, he lists out his desires, the material objects of his sham sermon: “moneie, wolle, chese, and whete” (VI.448), “licour of the vyne” (VI.452), and “a joly wenche in ev ery toun” (VI.453). Thus naming his desires, he tells the audience to expect a moral tale, which he is “wont to preche for to wynne” (VI.460); the basis of his sermon, then, is not to quash greed in the audience, but to inspire greed so that they might purchase more relics and line the Pardoner’s pockets. Yet his Tale immediately conjures up a scene of the very vices he has just told the audience he enjoys, thus setting up a framework of inspiring greed through the veneer of repudiation; the three youth who
eat and drink to excess (VI.468) and the “tombesteres / Fetys and smale, and yonge frusteres” (VI.477-78) embody the material goods and jolly wenches that he desires. However, he finishes the image of the scene with the note that “luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse,” thus manipulating his rhetoric to condemn the luxury of the sins he describes (VI.484).

Following this sermonized portion of the Tale, the Pardoner resumes the story of the three young rioters aiming to kill Death. While their quest highlights their crucial misunderstanding of the allegorical nature of Death as well as their own sinful hypocrisy, it also parodically points to the orthodox Christian idea of Christ’s resurrection, the ultimate defeat of death. While Nichols argues that the Pardoner’s quip that he will eat a cake and drink some ale before he tells his story is a parody on the Eucharist, the Tale is, more or less, rooted in orthodox Christianity, regardless of the morality of the speaker.148 The Tale begins with a fabliaux-like situation in which the rioters, stunned to learn of the untimely death of one of their drinking buddies, swear fellowship to each other as they vow to pursue the thief called Death who stole away their friend’s life: “Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother, / And ech of us bicomen otheres brother, / And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth” (VI.697-99). A parody of the Trinity, their configuration as a brotherhood in pursuit of Death foreshadows their own spiritual death, as their quest for the redemption of their brother is inspired not by spirituality, but by their own corporeal tunnel vision.

The rioters, in their configuration of a triune brotherhood, parallel the Trinity and thus suggest some of the ways that the Tale enacts the Pardoner’s encouragement of christomimetic practice, albeit a practice on his renegotiated terms. The Tale indeed serves to warn the audience about the dangers of sin; starting with rioters drunk before six in the morning and ending with a

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148 Ginsberg has found the Pardoner’s preaching to be deficient and lacking spiritual insight, and Adelman finds this to be particularly the case in relation to the Parson’s Tale.
triple-murder, the Tale hammers home the Pardoner’s message that greed is the root of all evil. How, then, might such a Tale function as part of the Pardoner’s system of encouraging sin to ensure a steady stream of customers buying his wares? To start, despite the core of the tale representing Christian values, the Pardoner intimates the desirability of indulgence and promises salvation at the price of his indulgences. This is not to say that the sermon is devoid of Christian values or any warning against the tavern sins, which clearly is not the case. Rather, there are simultaneous calls to indulge despite core conservative values. In particular, the configuration of the rioters calls to mind both the Trinity and the Eucharist: “Herkneth, felawes, we thre been al ones; / Lat ech of us holde up his hand til oother, / And ech of us bicomen otheres brother, / And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth” (VI.696-99). Simultaneously three and one, the rioters form a brotherhood that transfigures them into a fellowship which can take down Death—so they believe, at least. Approximating the Trinity and appropriating elements of the Eucharistic transfiguration, the rioters resonate with the Pardoner as perversely christomimetic agents.149

As these figures set off on their quest “al dronken in this rage,” they come across the infamous Old Man figure, who is infamously ambiguous in terms of his significance to the Tale.150 While the range of critical interpretations is broad, Steadman “strikes a balance between the allegorical and literal readings, and many critics rightly warn against imposing a single narrow interpretation on the figure” (Riverside 905). If there are multiple meanings in the one

149 William Kamowski posits that “Chaucer’s contrasting treatments of contemporary ecclesiastical ‘magic’ and the early Church’s miracles reveal an affinity with Wycliffite theology at least for the period when he compiled the fragments featuring the Wife of Bath, Pardoner, and Yeoman” (20). Likely composed during the 1390s, these three tales turn their attention to tensions between the contemporary Church and a small but significant growing support for Wycliffe’s denial of transubstantiation. Indeed, the “Pardoner’s Tale”’s continual engagement with elements of eucharistic and transubstantiation parody would resonate with Chaucer’s audience in the 1390s.

150 The Riverside Chaucer notes the range of critical discourse on the Old Man: “Critics have associated Chaucer’s old man with many figures: the Wandering Jew (Bushnell, SP 28, 1931, 450-60; Anderson, JEGP 45, 1946, 237-50), Elde, the messenger of Death (Ruggiers, Art of CT, 129); a personification of Death (Kittredge, Ch and His Poetry, 215; Dempster, Dramatic Irony, 77-78; see Thompson, Motif-Index C11 and Z111); even a realistic, individualized character (Owen, RES n.s. 2, 1951, 49-55)” (905).
body of the old man, then the depiction of the character shares much in common with the
Pardoner, who himself embodies deliberate ambiguity, both physical and symbolic. Indeed,
Alfred David describes the Old Man in the same vein, claiming that the “power of the old man is
the power of the symbol to suggest a range of meanings” (40). Lee Patterson connects the two,
arguing that the Old Man “embodies the Pardoner’s own contradictions” (History 406). When
questioned about his age, the Old Man laments that despite how far he has wandered, he cannot
find anyone who would “chaunge his youthe for myn age” (VI.724). L.O. Purdon argues that the
Old Man symbolizes the concept of mors secundi, described most fully by Augustine:

Thus the death of the soul results when God abandons it, the death of the body
when the soul departs. Therefore the death of the whole man, of both these
elements, comes when the soul, abandoned by God, leaves the body. For then the
soul no longer derives life from God, nor does the body receive life from the

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The Old Man, then, is doomed to continue wandering forever, suggesting a perpetual desire for
youth and renewal, a desire that cannot be sated; much like the Pardoner himself, who offers the
possibility of a spiritual renewal but ultimately leads his audiences astray with false relics, the
Old Man embodies the continual desire for death. More recently, Gudrun Richardson argues that
existing criticism on the Old Man suggests “an inability to accept that he cannot be classified”
(324), an argument that seems to build on David’s discussion of his deliberate ambiguity.

Instead, she explores a range of possibilities for his characterization, including his association
with the feminine; she links the vocabulary of the Old Man’s pleading for death with traditional
women’s mourning rituals. While the relationship between the Pardoner and the Old Man is a

151 Qtd. Purdon: [“Mors igitur animae fit, cum eam deserit Deus: sicut corporis, cum id deserit anima. Ergo utriusque
rei, id est totius hominis, mors est cum anima a Deo deserta deserit corpus. Ita enim nec ex Deo vivit ipsa, nec
corpus ex ipsa”] (339).
subject of debate, Patterson’s characterization of the Old Man as the embodiment of the Pardoner’s own contradictions suggests the ways the Old Man further complicates the Pardoner’s significations. The Old Man figuratively begs for death, wailing:

‘Leeve moder, leet me in!
Lo, how I vanisshe, flessh and blood and skin!
Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?
Moder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
That in my chaumbre longe time hath be,
Ye, for an heire clowte to wrappe me!’ (VI.731-36)

He begs to be reunited with the feminine earth, isolated as he is from death and salvation. Richardson points out that this conscientious search for death is unusual for medieval literature, as people would generally be approached by death and prepare accordingly but rarely actively seek the grave (329). As his body vanishes with age, he desires the comforts of mother earth; the masculine signifiers of his youth have long since disappeared or been hidden, as his body is “al forwrapped save thy face” and his flesh, blood, and skin vanishes as he ages (VI.718). With his masculine physicality disappearing, he begs for unity with the feminine earth which would allow his life to be complete. He transcends gendered categories in his pursuit of escape from life; the Pardoner occupies multiple gendered positions and manipulates his performances as best he can to achieve material means of sating his desires.

In considering how the Old Man resonates in conjunction with the rioters, his desire for death stands in stark contrast to their desire to slay death; indeed, their misguided goal seems to mark their doom for spiritual death in the same way that the Old Man is sentenced to a lifetime of spiritual exile. The rioters exemplify the Pardoner’s motto that greed is the root of all evil as
they ultimately cause their own deaths, thus emphasizing the importance of temperance and honesty; their discovery of gold in the location that Old Man discloses to them spurs on their greed, as they become examples to the audience of the dangers of unfettered greed and the spiritual death symbolized by their demises. Unable to be reconciled with Mother Earth, the Old Man must wander outside forever; unwilling to reconcile themselves with moral living, the rioters are doomed to spiritual death. In considering the correlation between the Old Man and the Pardoner himself, Patterson turns to penitential literature as a means of making sense of how the Pardoner speaks:

The point is not that the Pardoner's self-display is a confession in any sacramental sense, but that the literature of confession can explain both the spiritual condition out of which he speaks and the complicated meanings he imparts. Our problem with the Pardoner's self-revelation, after all, is less with content than with the significance of form, not so much what he says but the meaning of his act of speaking. (“Confession” 153)

Indeed, according to penitential models, a man in despair cannot confess because he has lost hope of God listening. The Old Man too despairs of ever receiving a reprieve from the prison of his body’s material condition. The Pardoner savors his inevitable spiritual damnation, preaching a message to his audience that he himself is unwilling or unable to follow; the old man despairs of his inability to find redemption, telling the rioters a moral warning that they are unable and unwilling to follow, a moral that he himself is unable to use.

However, the Pardoner seems to reflect a manner of living beyond the bounds of Christian despair; he seeks hedonistic pleasures with no regards to sacrifice. While a reading of the Pardoner based on penitential literature could certainly reflect a latent confession of sorts, it’s
important to consider readings that do not position the Pardoner as vastly Other from the remainder of the pilgrims. Indeed, Patterson’s reading, like so many in the vein of reading difference, characterizes the Pardoner in Kittredge’s terms of being “the one lost soul” on the pilgrimage; his stubborn repudiation of temperance and morality and blatant espousal of corporeal indulgence marks him as being less worthy of salvation than the remaining pilgrims. While the Old Man begs to be welcomed back into the earth, to trade his material goods for a burial shroud, the Pardoner rejects the trajectory of absolution following penance; while both men might represent the embodiment of contradictions, the Pardoner embodies his personal endorsement of life outside the system while simultaneously profiting from keeping the others within the system.

_The Pardoner as Fellow Pilgrim and Mirror of Sin_

Indeed, the Pardoner makes visible the sins in which most of the others silently or at least quietly engage, and indeed, his sermon invites their participation; while warning against the dangers of sin, he intimates its pleasures and concludes with the promise of forgiveness in his relics as he draws the pilgrims closer to his body. The other pilgrims might indulge in their own personal sins, but the Pardoner draws the others forth and invites the pilgrims to receive his pardon and the Host to kiss his relics—pardons and relics that he has just told them are scams, thus inviting them knowingly to sin along with him. He opens his prologue with a self-conscious description of his body as a didactic tool and closes his tale with a summons to the audience that they “Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun, / And mekely receyveth my pardoun” (VI.925-26). While the pilgrims are all more like the Pardoner than perhaps they’d like to admit, the Pardoner is distinct from the rest of them in being explicitly honest about his own iniquities and
going so far as to tempt them to sin with him; even if they were to listen to his sermon and buy indulgences out of concern for their salvations, they knowingly would be participating in a scam business. Like so many of the ambiguously or transgressively gendered figures from previous chapters, the Pardoner is a both reflection and a deflection of the insecurities of the other characters. It likely surprises no one that the Pardoner uses a tale about the dangers of greed and corporeal indulgence to try to inspire the pilgrims to admit their sinfulness, indulge in it, and pay him for his pardons. While his tale itself does not indicate whether or not his ruse works on the pilgrims, the Pardoner claims that “[b]y this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer, / An hundred mark,” a considerable amount of money (VI.389-90). Indeed, the narrator introduces the Pardoner as successful, as he notes that “with feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person and the peples apes” (I.705-06). Regardless of the authenticity of his claim, the success of selling pardons and indulgences correlates with a complicity in sinful behavior and the desire for forgiveness. His abrupt shift out of the realm of narrative and back to addressing his fellow pilgrims emphasizes this manipulation:

Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,

And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!

Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,

So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,

Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges. (VI.904-08)

The Pardoner joins together in a single breath a warning against avarice and an exhortation to give him money and luxurious items. Indeed, his very profession depends on people giving in to their own desires. While his sales pitch sermon works to manipulate the audience, he also offers them a way out; to desire is only human, and so to sate one’s own desire is natural as well.
The Host is the first pilgrim to react verbally, as the Pardoner has just named him as being “moost enoluped in synne” (VI.942) and invited him to “kisse the relikes everychon, / Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs” (VI.944-45). If the Host is, in turns, “circumspect and brash, polite and abusive, henpecked and aggressively masculine, self-effacing and domineering,” his ambivalences are mirrored and rivaled by those of the Pardoner (Pichaske and Sweetland 179). Indeed, while the Pardoner embodies and reflects the iniquities of all the pilgrims, his embodiment and reflection of the Host’s weaknesses in particular make clear his ambivalent character. Like the Pardoner, the Host figures himself in a Christ-like position, leading the pilgrims on their pilgrimage and orchestrating the story-telling competition as if overseeing a congregation. Indeed, the pun on his title of Host also suggests his alignment with Christ as Host. Yet unlike the Pardoner, he is not so outspoken about his hypocrisy and shortcomings, which nonetheless are apparent through his actions. He infamously threatens to cut off the Pardoner’s testicles as he rages, “I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond / In stide of relikes or of seintuarie” (VI.952-53). The threat focuses audience attention back on the body, which would have remained on display for the duration of the sermonizing, but only to utilize it as a vessel of manipulation; the Host’s castration threat re-centers questions of the Pardoner’s gendered and sexual embodiment.

The Pardoner is a man who constantly straddles binaries, who constantly holds in roiling stasis two opposing sides. Like the figure of the so-called alchemical “hermaphrodite,” he embodies both male and female elemental qualities and holds “contrarieties in stasis, creating a new substance … outside the norms of binary division” (DeVun 194). Building on Leah DeVun’s work on intersex subjectivity, I consider how the Pardoner’s body, regardless of sexual anatomy, signifies outside of binary division, thus resonating with representations of
intersexuality or gendered ambiguity. As such, he could have provoked medieval audiences whose religious leaders expounded upon the requirement that intersex subjectivity be channeled into either a male or a female category, but never across or outside the two. Characterizing the Pardoner as a figure who seems to resonate with descriptions of intersex bodies, however, runs the risk of veering into essentialist and reductive rhetoric about embodiment. Yet reading him in the context of medieval models for gender and sexuality allows more insight into how the symbolic presence of the Pardoner suggests possibilities for fantasies about transgressive corporeality. As DeVun describes, “because the alchemical hermaphrodite was a symbol and not a person capable of illicit behaviors, it carried few of the negative connotations associated with intersex humans, who were classified as ‘monsters’ in moral and medical texts, and who were treated with equal parts curiosity and disapprobation” (195). The Pardoner might be a literary symbol, yet he certainly is not free of connotations of illicit behaviors, considering his own boasts of such indulgent activities. He is both symbol and person, embodying sin and yet simultaneously suggesting the stereotypes associated with ambiguously gendered embodiment.

Thomas Laqueur, in another conception of gendered bodies, argues that classical and medieval medical concepts about the body would have been very different from contemporary binary gender systems. Given these differences, the Pardoner’s range of significations can continue to multiply; like Richardson’s conceptions of the Old Man, his ambiguity is what matters more than any individual classification. Thus Laqueur argues:

[T]he paradox of the one-sex model is that pairs of ordered contrarieties played off a single flesh in which they themselves did not adhere.

Fatherhood/motherhood, male/female, man/woman, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, honorable/dishonorable, legitimate/illegitimate, hot/cold,
right/left, and many other such pairs were read into a body that did not mark these
distinctions clearly. Order and hierarchy were imposed on it from outside. (61-62)

According to such a model, the Pardoner’s body, rather than symbolize muddled, ambiguous, or
ambivalent gender, stands in for what I call above the roiling stasis of two opposing binaries.
Indeed, Joan Cadden points out that “the notion of a masculine female or a feminine male is not
uncommon in the late Middle Ages” (201). Stemming from the concept of the seven-celled
uterus, in which the left cells held females, the right cells males, and the middle hermaphrodites,
the intersex body came to represent rebelliousness or disruption and the collapse of clear
distinction between “hermaphrodite anatomical features, transvestite acts, and homoerotic
behavior” (212). Rather than point to an essentialized truth about gender or sexuality, the
Pardoner’s allegedly ambivalent or “perverse” body reflects every pilgrim; containing these
“ordered contrarieties” makes him a perfect reflection of a diverse group of pilgrims who might
not be so vocally honest, but certainly share in his proclivities for material delights.

The final lines of the tale narrate the famous moments in which the Host repudiates the
Pardoner’s invitation to kneel and receive his pardon. As Burger argues, the Host’s bitter
rejection underscores his confirmation of selfhood through the rejection of the Pardoner
(“Kissing” 1146). This refusal to interact with the Pardoner resonates with Julia Kristeva’s
theory of abjection in which the self is protected by rejecting whatever “does not respect borders,
positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Robert Phillips, in building
on Kristeva’s ideas to discuss trans embodiment and subjectivity, argues that “the abject can thus
serve as a cleaving point of abstruseness and unease. […] The anxiety at the root of this unease
with transgender subjectivity can be traced back, in part, to a fear of the ambiguous” (20). The
Host’s anger, directed at the Pardoner for his deceptive words, ends up taking the form of
violence toward his body, suggesting the impulse to excise that which is unknowable or uncategorizable. As the Host threatens the Pardoner’s testicles to condemn the dishonesty of the offered relics, his actions connote the initial description by the narrator of the Pardoner’s physical alterity in the “General Prologue.” The very unknowability of the Pardoner’s body provokes continual curiosity, as indeed, the narrator claims that he “trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (I.691). He does not know or claim to know any truth about the Pardoner’s physical body, but rather states his self-consciously fallible suspicions. The often-glossed translation that the Pardoner is either a eunuch or a homosexual presents two very different possibilities for what the narrator believes the Pardoner to be, and the translations themselves are necessarily limited and imperfect, as they encourage readers to view the Pardoner in terms of his physicality. Further interpretations for the tensions embodied in the Pardoner include at least two further possibilities—first, the significance of the either-or binary implied by the Pardoner being either one thing or the other but nothing else, and second, the implications of the Pardoner being described in equine terms but nothing being said of the horse on which he rides. The former has been popularly discussed already in terms of identity and embodiment, but my examination of the Pardoner extends the discussion of the implications of the either-or binary in terms of the Pardoner’s symbolic embodied resonance; in other words, while the binary language could describe his physical self or gendered identity, it also emphasizes the binaries of the other pilgrims as symbolized and reflected in his own physicality.

In terms of the implications of the equine imagery, Beryl Rowland points to the medieval image of horse and rider symbolizing the libidinous body and the moderating soul, which would be significant for the Pardoner, whose own body represents the simultaneous provocation and suppression of desire (246-59). According to such a symbolic model, the Pardoner could be read...
as standing in for his own corporeality, as being both the rider and the mount; indeed, the “General Prologue” does not describe his horse, as it does for many other pilgrims, but rather, describes his physical appearance as that of a horse. Both geldings and mares are marked by the absence of masculinity, an absence ascribed to the Pardoner despite his hyperbolic participation in heteronormative activity; his hyperaggressive masculinity, like his sermon, is a performance, as he claims not to have but to desire a jolly wench in every town. His physical status has been described in varying terms of sexual and gendered difference, and yet these various medicalized descriptions all converge on the absence of a heteronormative masculinity. Rather than a character marked by physical absence, the Pardoner is a figure whose entire embodiment and personality uses pronounced absence as an occasion for desire—desire for physicality, for wealth, for hedonism and self-indulgence unfettered by Christian damnation. The unknowability of the Pardoner’s physical body underscores this hyperbolic desire, as it echoes the continual desire for indulgence that funds the economy of a pardon system.

The horse imagery is particularly resonant in the final lines of the Pardoner’s speech during his tale. He has repeated several times that the pilgrims should kneel down and receive his pardon, once during the course of his pseudo-sermon as a demonstration of his usual tactics (VI.904-06) and then again directly to pilgrims as a sales pitch (VI.925-26). After his repeated command to receive his pardon, the Pardoner gives a dire example of why the pilgrims should be so lucky as to have him in their company: “Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two / Doun of his hors and breke his nekke atwo” (VI.935-36). Given the Pardoner’s rhetoric on sin, indulgence, and absolution, the image of a pilgrim falling off the horse connotes the fall into sin; if pilgrims falls off their horses, the libidinous bodies, then they become subject to their desires and subsequent spiritual death. Indeed, “[w]han that the soule shal fro the body passe,” when the
governing mind gives way to the desiring body, the Pardoner will be there with his relics and indulgences for them to buy absolution. He can offer the simultaneous invitation to sin and the illusion of absolution from its punishment. As such, he is a figure whose embodiment and character are marked by its simultaneity of binaries, holding in constant stasis the oppositions he promises.

The use of ambiguously and transgressively gendered characteristics to describe the Pardoner’s embodiment and character are emphatic pronunciations of his alleged alterity. As the Pardoner charges the Host with being “moost enveloped in synne,” a status that would characterize the Host as being distinct from the remainder of the group, the Host fights back with terms that reify the Pardoner’s status as distinct and deficient, both morally and physically. Indeed, Kruger characterizes the interaction as a “moment of homosexual panic,” which intimates how the Host attacks the Pardoner’s sexuality to protect his own status as virile man (137). Further, his violent reaction against the Pardoner’s body points to a moment of gendered panic as well, as, with Kristeva, he rejects the Pardoner at any cost to keep his own masculine body free from the Pardoner’s allegedly corrupt ambiguous body. The specific rejection of the Pardoner’s body is not, of course, his stated aim, which instead seems to be repudiating any notion that he is the most enveloped in sin and denouncing the Pardoner’s self-conscious duplicity. Yet the Pardoner reflects the moral iniquities of the remaining pilgrims, and the Host himself is alternatively the pathetic cuckold and the boastful patriarch. Matching each other in their duplicity and doubleness, the Host reacts to the possibility that there might be some truth to the Pardoner’s rhetoric; invited to unbuckle his purse and retrieve a coin to pay for the privilege of kissing the Pardoner’s relics, the Host shoots down the invitation under the charge that such an action would leave him damned by Christ: “‘Nay, nay!’ quod he, ‘thanne have I Cristes
curs!” (VI.946). Rather than kiss a relic he knows to be false and indulge in the Pardoner’s
perverse cycle of desire and corporeal satisfaction, the Host states his own desire to cut off the
Pardoner’s testicles and enshrine them in hog turds to make his own false relic. The Host,
therefore, meets the Pardoner’s duplicity with his own threats of duplicity and violence; such a
reaction, rather than distance himself from the Pardoner, suggests the resonance that the
invitation holds with him and the similarities between the two in terms of their corporeality. As
the Pardoner is rumored to be “hermaphroditic,” a sign of the binary oppositions symbolized in
and presented through his body, the Host too represents internalized contradictions.

The Host’s exact reasoning for reacting so strongly to the Pardoner’s tale and subsequent
invitation is necessarily a matter of interpretation, given that his anger seems disproportionate to
the context of mere storytelling. Yet the reaction itself nonetheless emphasizes the similarities
between the two and the Pardoner’s representation of binary oppositions; swinging the poles
between equanimous and vitriolic, in control and out of control, leading and being led, the Host,
as does the Pardoner, embodies a wide range of contradictions. If the Pardoner reflects the vices
of the group through his simultaneously ambiguous and ambivalent gender presentation, then the
Host is at risk of being exposed for his own alternative masculinity. This is not, of course, to
suggest that the Host might be a gelding or a mare in the sense that the Pardoner is suspected to
be; rather, idealized masculinity would expose the supposed deficiencies of everyday
masculinity. Any one of the male pilgrims could be characterized as performing this everyday
masculinity, yet the Host is singled out as being the most enveloped in sin. Indeed, if the Host
and the Pardoner are to be viewed as being cut from the same cloth, so to speak, they both
occupy uncannily similar positions as perverse christomimetic leaders; Harry Bailly’s very title
as the Host and his position as a tavern-keeper leading a flock of largely sinful pilgrims to the
shrine at Canterbury suggests his parallelism with the Pardoner, who similarly acts as group leader in enabling the indulgence of sin by setting his own example.

Ultimately, neither the Pardoner nor the Host can rally the pilgrims effectively, as the only depiction of their responses includes them laughing; the Pardoner is too angry to speak after the Host’s verbal threat of castration, the Host continues his tirade by claiming that he “wol no lenger pleye / With thee, ne with noon oother angry man,” and the pilgrims begin to laugh (VI.961). Effectively nullifying the words of both Host and Pardoner, the laughter suggests that neither the sermon nor the threats of the Host accomplish what they set out to do. The Pardoner elicits no direct response from the pilgrims and the Host is not the one to shut down the Pardoner, as the Knight steps in and calls an end to their quarrel, commanding the Host to kiss the Pardoner. As the Tale is the last of the fragment, there is no further resolution to the Pardoner or the tale he tells, leaving questions of pilgrim response just as irresolvable as those regarding his physiognomy. The Pardoner remains a symbol of continually provoked desire, as attempts to know definitively the Pardoner share the impossibility of seeing through his many layers of signification.

This irresolvable nature of the Pardoner, holding within himself and reflecting outwardly so many oppositions, makes him akin to characters like Albina and her sisters; read most often in terms of their hyperaggressive personalities and morally condemnable actions, they are overlooked for the redeemable qualities of their tales. I do not propose that we champion mariticide or swindle food from starving infants; however, the deployment of such repellent actions within the literary frameworks of their respective stories does suggest the symbolic resonance of desire for sin, indulgence, and the drive for absolution. Indeed, the use of gender to depict this framework of desirable sinfulness points to the conjunction of repudiation and “not-
maleness.” The relegation of morally repugnant behavior to the literary bodies of women and ambiguously gendered people like the Pardoner means that their subjectivities can be silenced and reduced to an essentialized gendered embodiment. The focus of criticism on the description of the Pardoner as being a “geldyng or a mare” might not tell readers much about the Pardoner’s body or identity, as they are merely the undefinable musings of the narrator; however, the terms shift focus to the way that ambiguously gendered bodies and identities are manipulated to signify something morally repugnant. Such a description of the Pardoner need not come across as an endorsement of the status quo, but rather, should reflect the ways that the status quo manipulates gendered categories to deploy meaning and reify a sense of normality. Indeed, the Pardoner can be re-envisioned as a symbol of desire, as that corporeal indulgence that invites and yet frustrates, paradoxically calling his flock closer to God and closer to his own “coillons.”
Chapter Five – “Speak a Better Truth”: Articulating Gender in the Medieval Courts

Gendered Possibilities and Trans-like Identity

Up until this point in my dissertation, I have focused nearly solely on fictitious representations of transgressive and ambiguous genders. This has enabled me to consider the various ways that atypical sexual anatomies and non-normative gender performances have been utilized and fantasized on the manuscript page; taken out of the context of lived and embodied experiences, individuals with those atypical anatomies or gender performances have become literary figures and tropes, signifying, like Cohen’s monsters, something other than themselves.

For my final chapter, I turn to two separate court cases that allow some insight into how actual people could have presented and spoken for themselves: the 1354 Venetian case of Rolandina or Rolandinus Ronchaia and the 1395 English case of Eleanor or John Rykener (Karras and Boyd).\(^\text{152}\) Filtered, of course, through the voices of court scribes and marked by the context of a court trial rather than an account of everyday life, the transcripts do nonetheless provide glimpses of personal or everyday life through the differences that emerge between individual voice and external legal perception. In other words, despite being most explicitly concerned with allegedly criminal activities, the documents also include questions about Ronchaia’s and Rykener’s lives leading up to those activities as well as the responses that they themselves give. Because those responses are filtered through and recorded by a scribe, they are not necessarily the words they would have spoken, and thus simultaneously suggest the ways that biased

\(^{152}\) There is no standard edition or translation of the manuscript for Ronchaia’s trial, and so my translations are based on Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller’s transcription. I will mark any portion for which I draw upon Ruth Mazo Karras’s brief translations of excerpts in *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, pp. 183-84. Steven Kruger’s notes helped me immensely with my translations.
perceptions shaped conditions of gendered embodiment. The cases are distinct in terms of their geographical locations, and the details of the trials certainly are different. However, the cases also bear a striking number of similarities in terms of how the two people at their centers navigate their own genders and how the courts interrogate their presentations of gender and identity. Each of these people is reported to be a man dressed up as a female sex worker, yet each of their cases suggests that their identities likely were far more complex than what would be indicated by a simple clothing swap. In considering each case’s specific sociopolitical background, this chapter calls into attention both the historical context of the cases and the significance of the similarities in their treatment of gender.

As I hope to demonstrate by the end of this chapter, not only do Rykener’s and Ronchaia’s cases bear much in common with each other, but they also bear much in common with modern-day social and legal perceptions of women who are trans. Rather than trace a teleological line back to Rykener and Ronchaia as the medieval foremothers of contemporary trans women, I investigate the conditions that lead to such similar treatments of similar people despite the gaps in time and geography. It is with recourse to David Halperin’s envisioning of doing the history of queer or atypical gender (to borrow from Halperin’s title *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*) that I develop my methodology for this final chapter. As he reflects in revisions of his theories after critiques by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Halperin writes:

> If, as Sedgwick claimed, our ‘understanding of homosexual definition … is organized around a radical and irreducible incoherence’ (85), owing to this unrationlialized coexistence of different models, it is because we have preserved

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153 Stephen Justice theorizes this filtration, arguing that “in medieval and Early Modern studies at least, no matter whose words we are trying to examine, we receive them through the filter of clerical privilege, imagining that writing first of all always *means* that we may hear only clerics and their bosses” (10).
and retained different definitions of sex and gender from our pre-modern past, despite the logical contradictions among them. (12)

While in previous chapters I consider how gender has been represented in literary genres, here I investigate how a more historical—or, more accurately, historiographical—text can provide insight into the possibilities for gendered subjectivity and performance; in other words, I do not propose to define likely models of subjectivity or identity for Ronchaia and Rykener within the strict confines of their historical contexts. Rather, I consider how, despite their historical existence, their presentations in their court cases point to fantasies and fears about what gender can and should look like, in ways that overlap with the conventionally literary texts from previous chapters. As I discuss more fully below, Jeremy Goldberg goes so far as to argue that Rykener’s case is fabricated, and not an actual account of factual and historical events. Even Goldberg himself admits that he can’t argue for the absolute legitimacy of his own argument, but instead offers it up as a possibility among other possibilities. Whether or not we can assume absolute historical accuracy for the accounts of Rykener’s and Ronchaia’s lives, it is certain that their stories are told through the filter of a court scribe, not an objective reporter, who records their tales in the context of moral or legal transgressions. Thus, there must be some reflections of fantasized or imagined possibilities for gender in these particular societies.

In returning to the methodologies for writing history proposed by Halperin vis-à-vis Sedgwick, I turn to transgender theory in order to open up possibilities for Rykener’s and Ronchaia’s gendered subjectivities. However, while I am committed to a scholarly approach, I develop my methodology not from a strictly academic theoretical position, but from Leslie Feinberg’s survey of transgender-like lives, *Transgender Warriors*. Feinberg’s methodological
approach articulates an important motivation for any investigation into a history of transgender-like lives:

Today, a great deal of ‘gender theory’ is abstracted from human experience. But if theory is not the crystallized resin of experience, it ceases to be a guide to action. I offer history, politics, and theory that live and breathe because they are rooted in the experience of real people who fought flesh-and-blood battles for freedom.

(*Warriors* xiii)

Like Feinberg, I acknowledge that writing trans histories does not mean imposing transgender identities onto people who never identified themselves that way. Rather, this chapter aims to push back against assuming biologically essential identities for pre-modern individuals. By taking human experience as a starting point for my methodological and theoretical approach, this chapter calls attention to the stark differences—and overlaps—between how atypical or transgressive gender has been utilized and fictionalized across a range of genres and how it has been presented by individuals as they negotiate their subjectivities with the often-repressive institutions that were dominant in their historical moments.

*Rolandina Ronchaia and Speaking Gender*

While much of urban Italy, by the fourteenth-century, gained a reputation for being relatively lax in pursuing and prosecuting sex crimes, the treatment of people accused of sodomy was far from lax, and the case of Rolandina/Rolandinus is no exception. Guido Ruggiero contends that this intensified reaction was in response to the fear that sodomy allowed people to transgress their socially determined gender roles—men acting like women, so to speak—and thus rend the very fabric of society (“Sexual Criminality” 23). Venice, like much of Italy during
the fourteenth-century, was subject to frequent waves of the plague, debilitating the work force and thus prompting an influx of migrant workers, mostly single young men, in order to fill the reduced labor ranks. Gabriele de’ Mussis’s Historia de Morbo, the main source of information for the plague’s arrival in Europe, notes that in Venice, “it was found out that more than 70% of the people had died, and that within a short period 20 out of 24 excellent physicians had died” (Horrox 20). Unlike most of Italy’s urban centers, however, Venice flourished economically after the plague years. Yet while the economy was on the mend, increased dependence on immigrant labor radically altered a social structure based on the family unit. Thus Ruggiero’s observation linking concerns about society and panic about the effects of sodomy is not limited merely to a fear of transgressing gender roles, but extends to how that transgression could have ramifications beyond individual sex acts:

Sodomy threatened to undermine the basic organizational units of society—family, male-female bonding, reproduction—which struck at the heart of social self-perceptions. Fornication with nuns certainly hurt God, but sodomy destroyed society with or without his wrath. That this dissolution of the social fabric was then associated with God’s omnipotent destructive power may not have been so much a misreading of the Bible as a reading that fit nicely with the fears of an increasingly complex society. (Boundaries 109-10)

Alongside such fear of sexual transgression was the overtly gendered structure of Venice itself; as Robert Davis notes, “[u]rban space may well have been more obsessively gendered in Renaissance Venice than in most other Italian cities” (37). This gendering apportioned public space to men while women were largely sequestered inside domestic spaces; the exception to this rule was, of course, prostitutes, which reinforced the idea that such women were decidedly non-

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154 Gabriel de’ Mussis’ original account is included in the edition by Haeser.
elite. Ronchaia’s occupation of public space thus underscores the complexity of her identity and
gendered embodiment. While the Venetian court system’s treatment of sodomy became
increasingly violent throughout the Renaissance, with cases eventually tried before the
Avogadori and the Council of Ten,\textsuperscript{155} the Signore di Notte held the trials of people accused of
sodomy and other sex crimes in the fourteenth century. As the Signore di Notte, or the Lords of
the Night, kept extensive records of their trials, the first dating to 1348, contemporary scholars
can gain much insight into their specific concerns regarding individual cases. Ruggiero’s
observations about the Venetian linkage of sodomy and social corruption, then, bear immense
weight for considering the anxieties and fears in Ronchaia’s trial. As he points out, the bias
inherent in reading through criminal transcripts for evidence “constitutes its unique historical
value. These records reveal the values and perceptions of a Renaissance elite not through their
intellectualized literature or philosophy, but directly at the level where people name the objects
of their fears and aversions and attempt to control or eradicate them” (Boundaries 5).

Existing scholarship on the trial reflects these values, as I aim to show during my reading
of the transcript. Most discussion of Ronchaia focuses on the case’s significance for gay male
history, eliding the significance of Ronchaia’s pronounced choice of a female gender
presentation. Ruth Mazo Karras, in distinction to this general tendency, speculates that, given the
court’s descriptions, Ronchaia may have been, if she lived today, intersex or trans (Sexuality

\textsuperscript{155} Ruggiero describes the structure of the Venetian criminal justice system: “In broad outline, when a crime came to
public attention, it could be handled in one of three ways. First, summary justice could be carried out at the scene of
the crime. This was reserved for petty offenses such as brawling or carrying arms illegally and was the responsibility
of patrolling bodies such as the Cinque alla Pace, the Signori di Notte, and the Capi di Sestiere. Second, the case
could be investigated by the Avogadori of the Commune—loosely speaking, the communal attorneys—and argued
by them before one of the larger councils of state, normally the Council of Forty (known as the Forty). This large
body, after hearing oral arguments and reviewing the written ones, would decide guilt and penalty, generally with
little reference to law. Third, direct justice was reserved for the most important cases, which were handled in a
flexible manner within one council. This was the operating procedure of the most powerful and feared Council of
Ten, which dealt with conspiracy and treason and in the fifteenth century took over the prosecution of sodomy”
(Boundaries 4-5).
Michael Goodich describes Ronchaia as someone “who had always looked and acted like a woman, […] had been introduced to homosexuality after his wife’s death [and] then became a transvestite” (13). Ruggiero’s “Sexual Criminality” refers repeatedly to Ronchaia’s homosexuality and transvestism, although noting in passing that Ronchaia “perhaps hormonally was much closer to being a woman than a man” (23). Beatrice Michaelis notes that “Perhaps it concerned an intersex person” [Möglicherweise handelte es sich um eine intersexuelle Person’], but discusses the case no further than mentioning Ronchaia in a list of medieval people accused of sodomy (158 n. 477, my translation). Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller characterizes Ronchaia as “an example of those men who undertook this form of self-assertion by means of changing clothes and roles” (Sodom 45). These variable descriptions of Ronchaia’s gender suggest just how ambiguous various elements of the court transcript can be; given the biases of a criminal investigation as well as linguistic limitations, it seems important to investigate a multiplicity of possibilities for gender performance and embodiment. Thus, rather than claim a definitive anatomy or identity for Ronchaia, I read through her testimony for insight into the experiences of someone whose gendered performance and identity is not as simple as male or female. While I do use female pronouns, I do not mean to contradict my point that I do not wish to claim a definitive identity for Ronchaia; rather, this decision both reflects Ronchaia’s decision to present herself and live as a woman and also is meant to increase the ways in which contemporary scholarship considers possibilities for pre-modern identities. I return, then, to my statement about how existing scholarship reflects the values inherent in attempting to control or eradicate the objects of people’s fears and aversions; in defaulting to male pronouns or relegating to a brief footnote information about Ronchaia’s non-binary sexed body, conversations have avoided the
Pandora’s Box of pre-modern identity and foreclose possibility for a continually more variable history of gender performance.

The account of the trial exists on a single side of a folio in the register of the Signori di Notte. It is unique in its depiction of a person who is not male-presenting accused of sodomy. Given the Signori’s characteristic style of moralizing, the trial is remarkably free of any moral commentary and, rather, takes a relatively distanced tone of voice. Ronchaia’s story, then, begins on the Rialto, where she is apprehended under suspicion of having committed sodomy and tortured by the Signore di Notte in order for them to obtain a full account of her actions. However, the ordeal quickly becomes gratuitous, as Ronchaia tells the story of her early life with little, if any, resistance. The court interlocutor narrates that she

immediately without other tortures told and did confess, that more than ten years ago, that he himself took and betrothed a youth as his wife, which lasted a certain time, but he never knew her nor any other woman carnally, for he never had any carnal appetite, and his virile member could never become erect, and his wife left him and died in the time of the plague.¹⁵⁶

In prefacing any account of alleged criminality with background information about Ronchaia’s earlier experiences with marriage and sexuality, the trial clearly is concerned with more than the sexual criminality attached to the charges of sodomy. As the transcript is free from any moralizing, which, again, is relatively uncharacteristic of the Signori di Notte’s trial documentation, the focus seems to shift away from issues of spiritual morality; by not invoking the wrath of God in conjunction with sodomy and plague, the trial focuses on the everyday

¹⁵⁶ Venice, State Archive, Signori di Notte al Criminal. Processi, Reg. 6, fol. 64r. [“… statim sine aliquo tormento dixit et fuit confessus, quod medio sunt anni X et ultra, quod ipse accept et dispensavit unam iuvenem in uxorem, cum qua stetit certo tempore, nec numquam cognovit ipsam nec aliquam aliam mulierem in actu carnali, quia numquam habuit aliquem appetitum carnaele et numquam potuit erigere membrum suum virile, que sua uxor recessit ab ipso et obiit tempore mortalitatis”].
ramifications of human actions, rather than the larger spiritual and moral scope. Ronchaia does not seem to be on trial for crimes of a spiritual nature, but rather, for crimes of a more social sort. Of course the two are not mutually exclusive, but considering the Signori’s explicitly spiritual goals, the near-absence of religious or spiritual language in the trial points to a particular concern with social norms. On the one hand, the Signore di Notte had a particular interest in clearing Venice of its licentious reputation and thus in maintaining the image of a sexually moral city symbolized by a well-behaved married couple; its interest in Ronchaia’s earlier years, seemingly irrelevant in a sodomy trial, would have been very pertinent to this concern with the state of marriage. Given the Lords’ anxieties over the perceived dissolution of the family unit as social foundation, Ronchaia’s incompatibility with married life would have been of particular lurid interest to them. Considering the correlation between fear of sodomy and fear of plague, the detail about Ronchaia’s wife dying during a wave of the plague is particularly significant. It is also interesting to note that Ronchaia is described as taking a young wife is who is “unam iuvenem,” a term which technically could refer either to a young man or to a young woman, but mainly to refer to men. For example, Du Cange’s lexicon of medieval Latin lists for “iuvenes” only entries referring to men (479). To point to this single example as evidence of gender inversion would be far too speculative. Yet given the trial’s overall concern with Ronchaia’s ambivalent and ambiguously gendered subjectivity, it does seem interesting at the least, if not definitively significant, that descriptions of Ronchaia’s early life seem to compound implications of her non-normative sex and gender. On the one hand, describing the feminine Ronchaia as having had a masculine partner for a wife would have reified the allegedly essential nature of non-sodomitical relationships. Yet on the other hand, describing Ronchaia, still viewed

157 Hergemöller writes that Ronchaia left [his] wife in order to move to Venice (44), which seems to be a misreading of the transcript, which states that his wife left him and died thereafter during the plague: “que sua uxor recessit ab ipso et obiit tempore mortalitatis.”
essentially as a man, as having had a masculinized wife would have reinforced Ronchaia’s
predilection for sodomitical actions, foreshadowing her later life working and living as what the
court describes as merely “present[ing] himself as female” [presentebat ipsum feminam].

However, implicit in the Lords’ account of Ronchaia’s early marriage is also anxiety over
the possibility that her impotence did not bar her from sexual experience. Widening the scope of
the trial from sodomitical acts to Ronchaia’s entire life means, of course, that more is on trial
than sex acts; the trial’s implicit focus on Ronchaia’s femininity points to far more of a category
crisis (to borrow Garber’s term) than that of the divide between “sodomite” and “heterosexual.”
Placing the terms in distinction to each other is, of course, anachronistic and reductive, given that
neither was an identity category in the modern sense. A better way of considering the anxieties
of the trial might be, then, to discuss how it navigates binary gender; the trial refers repeatedly
both to sodomy and to Ronchaia’s physical and performed femininity. While sodomitical
discourse frequently compared acts of sodomy to effeminacy and femininity, Ronchaia’s trial
introduces the literal conflict of conceiving of someone as alternately masculine or feminine.

After Ronchaia travels to Padua to stay with a relative in Macon, she is recognized as
female by the people around her, a recognition that follows her into the bedroom:

Finally, one night, while in a bed in the house at Macon, one man, a man who was
a guest in the house, thinking he would be female, with the intention of knowing
him carnally in the manner of a woman, went into bed beside him, grabbing him,
and began to kiss him and to embrace and uncover his breasts, which seemed
feminine, and climbed on top of his body. Truly, the said Rolandinus, taking the
office of a woman and wanting to be considered a woman, hid his member from
the other one and grabbed the member of that same man and put himself in the

158 See, for example, Karma Lochrie’s *Heterosyncrasies*, which I discuss in Chapter Two.
rear position, so that the other man ejaculated, and when this was done, he sent him away, and so, in the same way he was with two others in Padua, thinking him female.\textsuperscript{159}

The testimony doesn’t describe the encounter as either prostitution or as rape, ignoring the question of consent altogether. Instead, it focuses in explicit detail on how Ronchaia began to experience sex as a woman, emphasizing her feminine breasts and overall appearance. The drawn-out and sexualized descriptions of Ronchaia’s femininity seem to serve a dual purpose: First, they focus the alleged criminality on Ronchaia’s passive role rather than attributing any criminality to the man who climbed in bed with her without her consent. The emphasis on the criminality of Rolandina’s passive role might seem typical for the medieval West, but late medieval and Renaissance Venice had very distinct views on levels of criminality inherent in sodomitical acts. As Ruggiero points out in his survey of sodomy prosecutions, “[t]he patiens, or passive partner, was normally let off with a light penalty or no penalty at all while the agens, or active partner, was […] normally executed” (\textit{Eros} 121).\textsuperscript{160} Thus, the trial’s emphasis on Ronchaia’s femininity seems to function to ameliorate her attacker’s culpability. Its departure from the usual Venetian treatment of sodomy underscores the particularity of Ronchaia’s case; this was no simple sodomy case, as gravely as those cases were treated, but rather, had far more dangerous ramifications in the eyes of the courts. If a long tradition of theological discourse railed against sodomy, classing passive partners as occupying the female role, then Ronchaia’s

\textsuperscript{159} “[Postremo, quadam nocte, dum foret in lecto in domo ipsius maconi, unus homo, qui homo, qui hospitabatur in domo putans ipsum fore feminam, cum animo cognoscendi ipsum ut feminam carnale, intravit lectum prope ipsum apprehendens eum et incepit ipsum osculare et amplectere et stringere ei mamillas, quas habet ad modum femine, et ascendere super corpus ipsum. Dictus vero Rolandinus accipiens officium feminam et volens censeri ut femina, abscondit sibi suum membrum et apprehendit membrum ipsius hominis et posuit sibi in positione de retro, ut dictus homo spermatizavit, et hoc facto dimisit ipsum, et sic et eodem modo fuit cum duabus aliis in Padua, putantibus ipsum feminam.”

\textsuperscript{160} Ruggiero does note that this active-passive distinction wasn’t discussed with regularity until after the mid-1440s, nearly one hundred years after Ronchaia’s case, but that this was not a new distinction; rather, the Council of Ten, which took over sodomy cases from the Signori di Notte, was more careful to report on the existing trend (124).
case represents the literal possibility for someone assigned male at birth to live as, and *be*, a woman.

After her initial experiences in Padua, Ronchaia travels on to Venice, where she continues life as a woman, both in the bedroom and in everyday life; people on the street read her appearance as female and call her by the feminine version of her name, switching from Rolandinus to Rolandina. It is important to note that, up until this point, her sexual encounters have been described in a very ambiguous manner; specifically, the transcript doesn’t make it clear whether Ronchaia was working as a prostitute or not. Yet by the time that Ronchaia arrives in Venice, there can be no mistake about how the Signori view her actions; steadily passing as female in everyday life and already having had sex as a woman, Ronchaia acts in Venice in ways treated explicitly as prostitution. As such, the trial takes a specific interest in Ronchaia’s apparent modes of hiding and deception; the language of being hidden—“ocultabat”—or manifest and visible—“manifestissime presentebat”—suggests a duality between perceptions of a true self and of a performative act. Ronchaia might be just as good a woman as anyone else, but she is perceived solely in terms of performance, putting up a good act and deceiving people, just like the Pardoner, for personal gain. These biases about trans-like femininity become increasingly apparent in descriptions of Ronchaia’s sex work:

And continuously he was used in bed like the whores of the Rialto and went to the bathhouses with them, and he hid his member on either side, so that no one ever realized, and manifestly he presented himself as female. And for this reason he was requested by many and infinite men for carnal acts here in Venice, and with many he persisted in the same said act in his home, and elsewhere with many men at their request, who thought he was female, by which he deceived in this way,
specifically, that when they were over his body, insofar as he could, he hid his
member and took the member of the one having coitus with him and put it in his
rear parts and remained with them until they emitted sperm, giving them every
delight as prostitutes do to our men. He persevered in this kind of sin for about
seven years or more.¹⁶¹

In considering the description of Ronchaia’s activities in Venice, what comes across as
particularly striking is the immediate conjunction of active and passive voices; she “is used”
[utabatur] like the prostitutes of the Rialto and simultaneously “went” [eundo] to the bathhouses
with them. This tension between Ronchaia as the active subject and passive object of actions
underscores much of the anxiety implicit in the case itself. Ronchaia, in a single sentence, is both
“like the whores of the Rialto” [cum meretricibus Rivoalti], implying a distinction between her
and the rest of them, and one of them, going to the bathhouses no differently from the rest.

Ronchaia is, in a way, simultaneously the *patiens* and the *agens*; when described in sex
acts, she is undoubtedly the passive partner: she “took the member of the one having coitus with
[her] and put it in [her] rear parts” [capiebat membrum choeuntis cum ipso et ponebat sibi
impostremo]. While most medieval sodomy cases would have treated the passive partner more
harshly, Venetian conceptions of sodomy viewed the passive partner as less culpable; clearly that
is not the case here. The continual descriptions of Ronchaia as arbiter of action, despite her
passive role in the physical sex acts, seem to visualize her in terms associated more closely with
the *agens*. This tension is reminiscent of the rhetoric that characterizes much of sodomitical

¹⁶¹ [“Et continuo utabatur cum meretricibus Rivoalti in lecto et eundo ad stuvas cum ipsis, et utroque latere intantum
ocultabat membrum suum, quod aliquam numquam perpendit, et manifestissime presentebat ipsum feminam. Et
propter hoc fuit requisitus ad actum carnalem per multas et infinitos homines hic in Venetis, et cum multis stetit in
dicto actu domi ipsius, et cum multis alibi ad requisitionem ipsorum, qui putabant ipsum fore feminam, quo
decipiebat sub hoc modo, velidelicet, quod quando erant super corpus ipsius, inquantum potuit, ocultabat membrum
suum et capiebat membrum choeuntis cum ipso et ponebat sibi impostremo et stabant cum ipsis donec emittabant
sperma, dando ipsis omnem delectationem ut faciant meretrices nostris. In quo quiddam peccato perseveravit ab
anno VII circa et ultra.”]
discourse: the fear that sodomy could turn men into women, unsettling the categories of masculinity and femininity. For instance, Alain de Lille (d. 1202), in a passage with striking parallels to Ronchaia’s case, uses gender category inversion to lament sins against nature:

The sex of active nature trembles shamefully at the way in which it declines into passive nature. Man is made woman, he blackens the honor of his sex, the craft of magic Venus makes him of double gender. He is both predicate and subject, he becomes likewise of two declensions, he pushes the laws of grammar too far. He, though made by Nature's skill, barbarously denies that he is a man. (Moffat 1)\(^1\)

The language used to criminalize Ronchaia’s actions strongly resonates with Alain’s manipulation of active and passive voices, making her both “predicate and subject” within the same sentence. Jan Ziolkowski points out that Alain’s text participates in a long tradition of using grammatical terminology to describe sexual relationships, a tradition including ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Islam and the medieval West, and his near-contemporaries, Walter of Châtillon and Geoffrey of Vinsauf (esp. 51-76). Alain’s rhetoric participates in and expounds on this tradition to utilize hermaphroditic imagery, invoking anxiety over transgressions against Nature through the manipulation of language. Ronchaia’s case, however, corporealis those anxieties in descriptions of her body; beyond shifting the rules of grammar, she shifts and overhauls the rules of gender.

Indeed, Ronchaia is described as both approximating and embodying a woman, as well as both acting and being acted upon. While every human being, of course, both will act and be acted upon, the conjunction of activity and passivity in a case concerned precisely with the navigation of those terms takes on particular importance. She is “requested by many and infinite

\(^1\) [“Activi generus sexus, se torpiter horret / Sic in passivum degenerare genus. / Femina vir factus, sexus denigrat honorem. / Ars magicae Veneris hermaphroditat eum. / Praedicat et subjicit, fit duplex terminus idem, / Grammaticae leges ampliat ille nimis. / Se negat esse virum, Naturae factus in arte / Barbarus.”]
men” [requisitus … per multas et infinitos homines] as a direct result of her actions in what’s described as an imitation of femininity: “he hid his member on either side, so that no one ever realized, and manifestly he presented himself as female” [utroque latere intantum occultabat membrum suum, quod aliqua numquam perpendit, et manifestissime presentebat ipsum feminam]. At no point does the trial engage in any of the rhetoric characteristic of the Signore’s usual treatment of sodomy and focus on the alleged immorality of the sex acts themselves. Instead, it is Ronchaia’s social and sexual embodiment of femininity as well as her navigation of active and passive roles that is on trial.

The descriptions of Ronchaia’s desirability raise more questions than can be given satisfying answers, as do the questions of gender and identity altogether. As a result of having presented herself as a woman, large numbers of men begin requesting her, clearly a success for someone working with the prostitutes on the Rialto. What is not clear, however, is what makes Ronchaia so desirable. The trial continually reasserts that Ronchaia’s partners were unwitting, saving them from charges of sodomy or criminality, thus allowing for a more intensified focus on how she “deceived” the men [decipiebat]. Implicit, then, is a contradiction in the men’s desire for her; she allegedly deceived the men, meaning that she would have looked just like any other woman, and yet her performed femininity somehow makes her more desirable than she was before, suggesting that she was somehow distinct from the other women. The implications of this contradiction are especially significant, considering both the outcome of the case and its similarities to how gender was and continues to be monitored for people whose gender identities and presentations don’t align with the sex assigned to them at birth.163 The rhetoric of calling

163 Again, while looking for specific evidence of transgender people in the Middle Ages raises the problem of anachronistic identity, it would be an oversight to imagine that there were never people whose gender performances and identities did not align with the sexes assigned to them at birth, regardless of whether or not they would have identified as transgender according to our contemporary understandings.
some “deceptive” for “tricking” customers, in both the medieval and modern worlds, assumes the absolutely essential nature of an assigned sex. Further, it both rests on and reinforces stereotypes that associate women’s sexuality with suspiciousness and criminality. This “suspiciousness” is more often than not linked to concerns about male control of sexuality, both their own and the women’s, and thus charges of deception make the sexuality of women, particularly trans and gender non-conforming women, something criminal that must be policed.

After having given the account of Ronchaia’s alleged criminal sexual activities, the trial moves into its interrogation phase, which reveals some of the anxieties and specific interests of the courts that were only implicit up until this point:

When he was asked if no one standing with him in that act had ever examined him about his member, he responded no. When he was asked if standing with them could make his own member become erect, he responded no. When he was asked for what cause he had committed this sin, he responded *nothing else relevant found.*

First, the interrogators are concerned with whether or not Ronchaia’s partners were aware of her natal anatomy, thus calling into question if the partners were complicit in acts of sodomy. However, such a question not only registers a concern with the spread of allegedly sinful sexuality, it also allows the judges to close the case neatly, their judgment concerned only with Ronchaia’s actions. Having accounted for the actions of Ronchaia’s partners—and again, whether or not these men actually were aware of Ronchaia’s anatomy or even attracted to her specifically because of that anatomy are questions for which there are no easy answers—the judges can resume focus on Ronchaia’s actions and body. Their concern is about whether or not

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164 [“Interrogatus, si numquam aliquis stans cum ipso in ipso actu perpend[erat] se de ipso membro, respondit non. Interrogatus, si stando cum eis erigebatur membrum suum, respondit non. Interrogatus, ob quam causam comitabat istud peccatum, respondet *ne inventum aliud pertinere*.’’]
Ronchaia can achieve an erection, pointing to questions about her sexual potential as either an active or passive partner; as she gives detailed accounts of her passive role in sex acts, the possibility that, at times, she was also taking the active role would have meant she was crossing gendered and sexed borders continually. This concern has a long history of moral and theological anxiety over the sexuality of people with “hermaphroditic,” or intersex, anatomies, who are expected to perform sexually and live daily lives either as male or as female, but never to switch back and forth. Yet the judges never classify Ronchaia as intersex; they merely note her anatomically feminine attributes and her female gender performance. At stake for them, then, is not necessarily whether or not Ronchaia willfully could have used her ambiguous anatomy to go back and forth across the categories of sex and gender. Rather, they seem concerned with the possibility that Ronchaia, whom they describe as male and not intersex, could live successfully in a manner other than the sex assigned at birth. Indeed, at the beginning of the trial, the transcript notes that Ronchaia had never been able to achieve an erection while previously married to a woman, and now, the judges make it clear that she had never had an erection with men either. While this might point to some sort of resolution in terms of Ronchaia never using her anatomy to perform multiple sexual roles, it’s clear that this is no acceptable resolution for the judges. Whatever the reason for their concern with Ronchaia’s impotence, the fact remains, in the eyes of the court, that her lack of sexual virility did not bar her from engaging in intercourse.

The third question continues the pattern of raising more concerns than providing resolution; when the judges ask Ronchaia why she engaged in such allegedly sinful activities, the transcript censors her answer, replacing only with the laconic note that “nothing else relevant

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165 Leah DeVun describes Pseudo-Albert’s thirteenth-century De secretis mulierum, Peter of Poiter’s 1216 Summa de confessione, and Peter the Chanter’s twelfth-century De vitio sodomitico as examples of texts that fix the intersex individual in either male or female categories.
Hergemöller marks the passage with an asterisk, noting that “[u]nsichere Lesarten (Konjekturen) werden durch * gekennzeichnet” [uncertain readings (conjectures) are marked with an asterisk] (Einführung 130, my translation). While it’s impossible to know exactly what was said, the redaction or obfuscation of whatever it is that Ronchaia said seems to suggest that she refused to change her story in order to fit the narrative that the courts wanted to hear. Indeed, considering the account of the actions following the redacted answer can give some insight into the overall sense of Ronchaia’s speech, as she continues to refuse to recant or change what she insists is the truth:

Later, the same Rolandinus was appointed to torture from the mandate of the lords and interrogated, so that he better tell the truth, and as he would not say anything else but what he said above, a lashing was given to him, after nothing else was said by him other than what is said and written above.167

While Ronchaia is being tortured, she gives the same account of events that she has already given, apparently affirming the truthfulness of her confession. This presumably means that the Signori have the evidence that they need in order to proceed with the conviction. Yet as has already been made apparent, the Signori do not seem content to convict Ronchaia of sodomy; rather, their insistence that she tell a different truth or redact her account of events seems to point to a desire to eradicate her subjectivity altogether. In other words, telling a better, and different, truth would serve a dual purpose. First, confession would be the first step in living what the court would deem a morally upstanding lifestyle, perhaps saving her soul from the clutches of her alleged sins. However, the judges express no concern whatsoever for the state of her soul. It

166 [“Ne inventum aliud pertinere.”]
167 [Posthec fuit idem Rolandinus positus ad tormentum de mandato ipsorum dominorum et interrogatus, ut diceret melius veritatem, et dum non diceret aliud, quam id, quod superius dixit, fuit sibi data una sachata propter nichil aliud dixisse quam ea, que superius dicta et scripta sunt.]
seems more likely that their request for a better truth has a different motivation: in redacting her story, Ronchaia would have to tailor her story to fit their understandings of what sex and gender should be. In other words, she would have to admit that she was not really living as a woman after all, thus saving the Signori the trouble of having to reconsider where her identity might fit within medieval categories for gender and sexuality. Indeed, Hergemöller characterizes Ronchaia as someone who “spoke with the courage of someone who has nothing more to lose. He knew that in accordance with the laws of Venice his life was forfeit” (Sodom 45). While the transcript doesn’t necessarily provide evidence that Ronchaia has come to terms with the impending execution, Hergemöller’s reading of the courageous tone of voice certainly seems to be substantiated by her refusal to tailor the details of her story to fit the Signori’s desired confession; Ronchaia gives an account of her life before ever having been tortured and refuses to recant or even give a fabricated version of events in order to keep the Signori from perpetrating further violence against her. Whether or not she would have more closely identified with a contemporary understanding of homosexuality, as Hergemöller discusses, his overall characterization of Ronchaia is an apt description of her non-normative identity: “Rolandinus gives proof of being able, in the context of repressive role constraints, to maintain a decisive self-image and find a niche in which rudimentary forms of self-realisation could be attained” (Sodom 45). Ultimately, Ronchaia refuses to tell the Signori anything other than what she says is the truth despite torture and threats of execution; she re-affirms her statements in front of the duke on March 18th after having been tortured numerous times and presumably having been given the chance for exoneration via recanting her testimony and resuming a male gender performance. Eleven days later, two of the three judges of the Giudice di Proprio hand down the sentence that she is to be executed by burning.
With no easy answers for questions of Ronchaia’s motivations, other than the slimmest glimpses into her potential intersex status, navigating any claims for her identity remains a circuitous and impossible task; this is, however, a task that offers up fruitful points of inquiry along the way. The brief account of her life points to the tensions between how she is recognized and how she presents herself; indeed, she is recognized as a woman before even intentionally presenting herself as such:

After he came to Venice, and because he had already been with men in the manner of a woman, accepting the office of a woman, and also because of appearing feminine on the outside, the rumor was only spread, because all were thinking him to be female, although he would wear the clothes of a man, and many had named him “Rolandina.”

Ronchaia’s wavering between the roles of male and female would have played directly into theological fears about the dangerous sexual potential of intersex people. However, it also raises further questions about identity. Does Ronchaia begin identifying as and performing the role of “Rolandina” out of convenience or desire? Is she motivated by economic benefits or does she work as a prostitute because of economic necessity? While, theoretically, it could be possible that Ronchaia dresses as a woman in order to make money as a prostitute, assuming such a claim by default rests on misogynist and transmisogynist premises, regardless of whether or not the terms themselves are anachronistic. While it is true that in Ronchaia’s case, and in Rykener’s, the subjects are assigned male at birth and engaging in sex work as women, that does not mean that their motivations are sexual deviance or deception, nor does it preclude the possibility that this might have been one of very few means of economic survival for someone in their positions.

168 [Posthec venit Venetias, et cum quia iam fuerat cum hominibus ut femina, accipiens officium femine, cum etiam propter actus muliebris extrinsecus apparentes, fama in tantum divulgata fuerat, quod omnes extimabant ipsum fore feminam, licet portaret pannos ad modum virorum, et multi nominabant ipsum ‘Rolandinam’.]
In concluding discussion of Ronchaia’s case before transitioning into Eleanor or John Rykener’s case, I return to some of the unanswerable questions raised throughout the course of the trial, and in particular concerning Ronchaia’s motivations and gender performance. While the trial ends with the note of her execution, ending a discussion of her story with the execution shifts the focus to how the Signori viewed her actions. Instead, concluding with a discussion of the questions that arise regarding how she might have lived her life shifts the focus to her own navigation of gender in the face of both social constraints and social opportunities. First, when the Signori ask her why she lived as a woman, the account of her answer is replaced with the note that she wasn’t found to have said anything relevant. Does this mean, then, that she gave an answer that the Signori did not want to hear, an answer that led them to demand that she “better speak the truth?” Did she give an actual account of her motivations that might have allowed some insight into her own understanding of her gendered subjectivity? Could she, exhausted from prolonged torture and imprisonment, have responded with an answer that was, quite literally, irrelevant to the question posed? The only possible definitive conclusion that can be drawn is that her own voice and account of herself were considered too irrelevant—or too dangerous—to be included in a state-sanctioned portrait of her alleged criminal and immoral activity; rendering her voice illegible makes it easier for her identity to be subsumed under the category of “sodomite” and expunged from Venetian society in accordance with her execution. The Signori present questions of her atypical sexual anatomy and possible intersex status in a manner that seems to allow them to classify her as a failed man, so to speak, unable to maintain a legitimate marriage or to be an active—masculine—sex partner. Yet the dissonance between her account and the Signori’s desire for her to tell a different story should remind readers of the case to consider not only the Signori’s version of accounts, but the possibilities for Ronchaia’s as
well; in listening more closely to the moments when she was silenced, readers can find glimpses of a life that the Signori could not fully suppress or control.

_Eleanor Rykener and Learning the Navigation of Gender_

While scholarship on Ronchaia, in either English or German, is relatively limited, discussion of Eleanor or John Rykener has been far more common following David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Karras’s edition of the court testimony in 1994. The relative lack of scholarship on Ronchaia could possibly be attributed to lack of access to the manuscript as well as the nonexistence of a standard edition or English translation, problems which, thanks to Boyd and Karras’s edition as well as Paul Halsall’s digital publication, do not extend to Rykener. From a less logistical point of view, however, Rykener’s case has its own nuances that distinguish it from Ronchaia’s; while Ronchaia’s gendered self-presentation marked her as distinct from the rest of people investigated for charges of sodomy, sodomy itself was pursued and prosecuted quite frequently in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. England, on the other hand, has hardly any documentation of court investigations into sodomy or cross-dressing. As Judith Bennett and Shannon McSheffery note, Rykener is one of only two “cross-dressing” people (specifically, people assigned male at birth) of the time period to be investigated (2-3). Indeed, Boyd and Karras note that there exist no English records of legislation against sodomy until the sixteenth century; the thirteenth-century legal treatises _Fleta_ and _Britton_ prescribe the death penalty for sodomy, but they are not legal codes, and there is neither record of any such legal proscription against sodomy nor evidence that such a penalty was carried out (484 n. 6). In considering why

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169 The other person charged with cross-dressing in women’s clothing is John Tirell, who was arrested and subsequently released in June 1425 after taking an oath of good behavior (“Early, Erotic, Alien” 3). Tirell’s case provides an interesting counterpoint to Rykener’s and Ronchaia’s; the oath of resuming good behavior suggests perceptions of trans-like gender as purely performative while supposedly natural gender is hidden behind a veneer of performance but able to be resumed if only the performance is given up.
Rykener’s case, now so widely discussed, escaped critical attention for so long, Karras and Boyd point to the early twentieth-century scholar A. H. Thomas suppressing any mention of the case’s queer content in the *Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London A.D. 1381-1412* (559-60). Whatever the case, discussion of Rykener’s gender presentation has ranged from early scholarly characterizations of it as “transvestite” to later speculations of a “transgender-like” identity (Linkinen and Karras 112) and even such explicitly transphobic descriptions of Rykener as “dishonest” or a “cheat” (Goldberg 50). Given that financial earnings for women were far more limited than for men, it is doubtful that Rykener deliberately chose prostitution as a job and merely dressed as a woman for the economic benefits. As Karras points out, women such as Rykener who did not work out of a brothel might have had more independence, but “because of their lack of a steady clientele, their income would have been low and the threat of violence by strangers would always be present” (*Common Women* 71). Indeed, Barbara Hanawalt writes that while many details of Rykener’s life are remarkable, it is rather unremarkable in that it “demonstrates the way prostitutes moved in and out of that role, traveled around, and combined it with other trades” (203). It seems that prostitution alone would not have been a get-rich-quick scheme, and certainly not a reason to make someone decide to live as a woman for the earning opportunity.

Despite Goldberg’s limited and problematic characterizations of Rykener’s gender—“a man masquerading as a woman” who sells sex “to his unwitting, and hence cheated customers”—his investigation into the case’s historicity is important for considering the possibilities for its presentation and perception of gender (50). He investigates the onomastics involved in the trial, tracking down likely contenders for the names used in the trial, and posits fourteenth-century London’s social concern with honesty as a byproduct of its urban trade
economy. Ultimately, he contends that Rykener’s case was fabricated or at least fictionalized as “a political satire,” and yet, his hypothesis need not disqualify any discussion of the case that takes Rykener’s speech at face value; indeed, Goldberg’s discussions are strictly historical, and he admits that his final conclusion rests on an “imaginative leap” (66). Furthermore, he does not take into account any possibilities for gendered variance and assumes an essentialist and limited view toward Rykener’s gender performance. However, his conclusion, regardless of necessitating an “imaginative leap,” is well within the realm of possibility, just as informed speculation on variable gender, too, can be within the realm of possibility.

Rykener’s voice is available to contemporary audiences through the filter of a court scribe, and regardless of her case’s historicity or fictiveness, she is presented as the object of a criminal investigation. Goldberg offers, as a key piece of information, the point that “regardless of the underlying historicity of the persons or events described, the Rykener narrative works to reference overlapping contemporary concerns with governance” (62). However, does this mean that such concerns led court officials to fabricate the case as evidence of their skill in swiftly pursuing matters of public disorder? Or, does it mean that government officials, already concerned with establishing order in London, took a particular interest in Rykener, presenting the case as evidence of their aforementioned skills? These questions likely are impossible to answer definitively, and so I follow Carolyn Dinshaw in questioning “what we can do with this information. What kinds of histories, and what kinds of communities, can we create with it?” (“Queer Relations” 80). Thus, Goldberg’s conclusion must be considered alongside the work of the literary scholars who have undertaken Rykener’s case in the decades following the publication of its transcript. Indeed, the transmisogynist biases and assumptions that undergird Goldberg’s historical approach very well may be similar to those that informed the perceptions
of Rykener’s contemporaries, and so my reading of Rykener’s case follows the same methodological approach as my reading of Ronchaia’s; I take into account the historical and sociopolitical background of late fourteenth-century London and aim to expand the ways that we discuss the presentation of and possibilities for Rykener’s gender and its performance. As the case has already received a considerable amount of scholarship, including Boyd and Karras’s edition and translation, I will not include my own translation, but will provide the same detailed readings of the interpretive possibilities as with Ronchaia’s trial.

Rykener’s case begins with the note that John Britby and John Rykener were brought before the mayor and the alderman of London after having been detected in flagrante delicto in a stall in Soper’s Lane. 170 While the first mention of their sexual interaction presents a mutual act, John Britby soon confesses that he approached and solicited Rykener. At this point, he’s very careful to emphasize the extent of Rykener’s femininity: he says that he found her “dressed up as a woman, thinking he was a woman, asking him as he would a woman if he could commit a libidinous act with her.” 171 The act of solicitation does not negate Rykener’s compliance, and yet as the testimony continues, the implications are that Britby is not on trial for soliciting a prostitute or engaging in sodomy. Indeed, the act is never officially named as either prostitution or sodomy, and in fact, the court scribe, narrating Britby’s confession, seems careful not to name it. This ambiguous criminality sets the tone for the entire trial, as it suggests how the acts for which they are being tried are far more complex than either sodomy or prostitution. Explicitly gendered crimes in terms of their legal treatment, sodomy or prostitution would require fixing

170 As with Ronchaia, my use of name and pronoun reflects the specific usage in the manuscript, particularly in places when I am recounting summary. When engaging in my own critical readings, I will default to Rykener’s female name and pronouns; this is not to claim a definitive binary female identity of Rykener, but to broaden the scope of possibilities for identity and gender currently in discussion.
171 All citations and translations are from Karras and Boyd. Their edition is based on the manuscript located in the Corporation of London Records Office, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2 (1395) [Dictum Johannem Rykener vestitu muliebri ornatum, ipsumque mulierem fore suspicantem fuerat assecutus, petens ab eo, tanquam a muliere, si cum ea libidinose agere possit.]
Rykener into either a male or a female category, which, given Britby’s and Rykener’s accounts of alternating gender performances, the scribe seems reluctant to do. The pronominal slippage surrounding Britby’s initial testimony is tellingly significant. After having described the act as being “that detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice,” a fairly common euphemism for sodomy, the transcript’s representation of Britby’s account as switching to female pronouns seems to negate the possibility of sodomy. Of course, there are largely practical purposes for Britby’s use of “her” after having basically described Rykener as deceiving him; by emphasizing that he thought he was having sex with someone who could easily be described as female, he would minimize charges of criminality leveled against him. Indeed, the account never relates whether or not formal charges were filed or if sentences were handed down or justice meted out for either Britby or Rykener. The lack of attention paid to Britby certainly could be attributed to the note that his confession took place during a separate examination, thus allowing the court to focus more intensely on Rykener in this particular examination. Yet the pointed use of female pronouns when describing Britby’s perception—or at least his presentation, fabricated or not—of the case certainly serves to mitigate any fault that could be attributed to him. Soliciting a prostitute might have been morally objectionable, but it would not have been an offense serious enough to warrant a legal investigation. As Karras argues, prostitution was, while perhaps morally shunned, considered a social necessity, as “people believed that it offered a necessary outlet for masculine sex drives which, unrelieved, would undermine the social order” (Common Women 5). Further, she points out that repeated prohibitions against prostitution in London “reflected the failure of legislation and policy” (Common Women 14). While the questions surrounding Rykener’s gender performance might make her case a unique one, the occurrence of
prostitution would not have been something rare. In fact, having been arrested for prostitution would have been unusual; yet, of course, Rykener’s alleged crimes are never named explicitly.

The decision to use female pronouns can be attributed to the court scribe as well as to Britby. While the scribe could have been transcribing Britby’s words verbatim, he does not indicate any scrutiny into the pronominal slippage. Rather, the remainder of the testimony pays very conscious attention to the alleged superficiality and constructed nature of Rykener’s femininity. It is only when discussing Britby’s perception of Rykener that the scribe seems content to default to female pronouns. Again, this could reflect a desire on the part of the scribe, as well as Britby, to minimize criminal charges against Britby and focus the trial on Rykener. However, the court scribe would have had no personal investment in presenting the details of the case one way or another—ideally, at least. In considering implicit motivations for this particular gendered oscillation, it would not be much of an imaginative leap to offer up the possibility that the court had a vested interest in focusing criminal charges on Rykener rather than Britby; Britby, while self-admittedly participating in what could be variably classified as either sodomy or solicitation of prostitution, was the active partner, thus retaining his virility and a stable gender presentation. Although there are numerous theological and metaphorical treatises on the possibility that sodomy could render a man effeminate, the active partner would have maintained more masculinity than the passive partner.¹⁷² There existed very little prosecution of sodomy in England at the time period anyway, and so charging both partners with sodomy would have been a very isolated and significant outlier. Rykener, instead, becomes the scapegoat for social ills, while Britby is presented as the “unwitting” or “unsuspecting” victim of her (allegedly) criminally disordered behavior. Indeed, Ruth Evans argues that Rykener’s criminality was not

¹⁷² For example, Mark Jordan points to Raguel’s Passio S. Pelagii and Paul of Hungary’s Summa of Penance, as linking effeminacy and sodomy.
limited just to sexual offenses or transgressions of gender, but that she, in working a variety of jobs in addition to the aforementioned alleged crimes, “embodies the ‘absolute evil’ that Plato’s healthy city cannot tolerate: ‘that two things be in one, two functions in the same place, two qualities in one and the same being’” (“Production of Space” 49). The transcript of Rykener’s trial is replete not necessarily with duplicity, but certainly with doubleness; she lives as both John and Eleanor, has sex with men and women, performs sexually either like a man or like a woman, works a variety of jobs, and does it all with relative success. Britby’s solicitation of a prostitute may have been held by some to be morally objectionable, but every detail of Rykener’s existence seemed poised to undermine the foundation of London’s society, thus suggesting that that foundation might not be as solid as it seems. After all, Rykener is not the only person in her story living a life unattached to a family or a permanent social position; she might be the one in the spotlight for her allegedly glaring transgressions of social, sexed, and gendered categories, but her innumerable sex partners—both lay and clergy—also are culpable.

Importantly for this proliferation of people transgressing social and sexual mores, Britby’s and Rykener’s crimes are never named explicitly. As I mention above, the transcript offers no sense of resolution and no clear indication if any formal charges were filed or pursued. Goldberg argues that the trial’s presentation of sodomy “functions as a metaphor for a range of social evils that may have had particular resonances from a magisterial and metropolitan perspective,” including “dishonest trading, foreigners, incontinent clergy, the royal court, gender and sexuality” (63). While there is no explicit mention of sodomy, concern with Rykener’s gendered behavior and performance does seem to point to anxieties far more broad-reaching than a singular, and specifically sexual, one. As the document begins with the note that Britby and Rykener were brought before the presence of the Mayor and the Aldermen, and that Rykener was
“calling [himself] a woman” (482), the very beginning of the trial intertwines concerns about what might have been called sodomy with concerns about how Rykener presented her own gender and identity. After having briefly summarized the testimony gathered from Britby’s separate examination and the act committed between Britby and Rykener, the document displays a detailed interest in Rykener’s past and, thus implicitly, how she came to be the person standing before them for interrogation.

As with Ronchaia’s testimony, it doesn’t take much for Rykener to admit wholesale to the truthfulness of the allegedly criminal charges filed against her, whatever those charges might be. She doesn’t seem to mince her words or deny any charges in an attempt to resist legal retribution, but rather, immediately gives clear answers to whatever the interlocutors ask without there being any recourse to torture. The first point of interest in Rykener’s confession combines an interest in clothing with anxieties about “disordered” sexuality:

And [the aforesaid] John Rykener, brought here in women’s clothing and questioned about this matter [as told by Britby], acknowledged [himself] to have done everything just as John Britby had confessed [etc.]. Rykener was also asked who had taught him to exercise this vice, and for how long and in what places with what persons, masculine or feminine, [he] had committed that libidinous and unspeakable act.

As Karras and Tom Linkinen point out, without having access to the personal thoughts of medieval people and the words that they may have used to understand and identify themselves,

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173 [“se Eleanoram nominans”] Karras and Boyd note of their translation that they use brackets to signify “where the Latin pronoun used for Rykener is of indeterminate gender” (484 n. 12).
174 [“Et predictus Johannes Rykener in veste muliebri hic adductus de materia predicta allocutus cognovit se fecisse in omnibus prout idem Johannes Britby superius fatebatur etcetera. Quesitum fuit ulterioris a prefato Johanne Rykener quis ei docuit dictum vitium exercere et quanto tempore, in quibus locus, et cum quibus personis masculis sive feminis illud actum libidinosum et nephandum commisit.”] I have amended the translation in several places, indicating such changes with square brackets.
contemporary scholars “can rely on records of outward behavior and markers, and clothing is most prominent among these” (112). They follow Judith Bennett’s work on lesbianism in the Middle Ages to argue that, despite any concrete evidence of Rykener’s self-identity, “hir life as a male-bodied woman was ‘transgender-like’” (112). Given how, following this inquiry, she expresses an invested interest in living as a woman, and not just dressing in women’s clothing for the purposes of prostitution, it seems, as with Ronchaia’s case, a rather limited perspective to resist possibilities for Rykener beyond male transvestite. Indeed, Karras notes that “if she were to write those [original] articles over again she would suggest that we might understand Rykener as a transgender person rather than as ‘transvestite’,” the term originally used alongside Boyd in “The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London” (Revisited 111). Whatever the case for Rykener’s personal identity, the trial’s inquiry into what could easily have been named “sodomy,” if only Rykener could be identified easily as a man, presents a clear anxiety about the relationship of sexuality, gendered behavior, and possibilities for identity.

These anxieties become more and more manifest as the trial moves forward into Rykener’s own confession, rather than the tale as told by Britby. Following the inquisitor’s queries about who taught Rykener the craft of prostitution and for how long and in what gendered manner she practiced, she enumerates a lengthy list of deeds related to her “libidinous and unspeakable act,” which never is quite named. Her first recounted act is that of being socialized as a prostitute by Anna, another sex worker, and being re-dressed as a woman by Elizabeth Brouderer. As Karras and Boyd note in their original transcription, “Brouderer” likely refers to the woman’s position as an embroideress, rather than functioning as a surname. While some might point to this linkage of female socialization with job opportunities as evidence of

175 The decision to use the pronoun “hir” reflects a similar desire to mine in using female pronouns to widen the scope of identifiers within the realm of possibility for Rykener; “ze” and “hir” are gender-neutral pronouns which function grammatically in the same fashion as “he/his” or “she/hers.”
Rykener utilizing femininity in order to cash in on economic benefits, those benefits would have been slim, as I have discussed above. Karras and Linkinen describe Rykener’s situation in particular in claiming why such a plan would not, in fact, be very lucrative; Rykener worked as a sex worker, an embroideress, and a tapster, all female-gendered jobs, and “[g]iven differentials at the time between men’s and women’s wages, it is unlikely that ze chose to live as a woman because of these earning opportunities” (112-13). Rykener’s experience of learning femininity as part of an economic trade might have been the case, but it seems more likely that Rykener, hoping to live and pass as a woman or not, learned how to work in the few professions open to someone whose lived experience might not have afforded her the same social opportunities as normatively gendered people. While I will resist making too many anachronistic parallels, the same stereotypes surrounding sex work persist in the twenty-first-century, leading me to be wary of scholarly work that makes the same assumptions about pre-modern sex workers; sex workers are often depicted as women who voluntarily pursue such a line of work because they are seeking easy money or are biologically predisposed toward lasciviousness, stereotypes which certainly present themselves in medieval theological treatises and legal treatment of sex workers. Further, women who are transgender are often viewed as utilizing femininity as part of a masquerade in order to “dupe” or “cheat” unwitting men. As Vern and Bonnie Bullough write of the Middle Ages, “it was generally believed that a man would impersonate a woman either in an attempt to insinuate himself in the confidence of women for sexual purposes or as part of a witchcraft ceremony” (60). Thus, I resist a reading of Rykener’s narrative that conceives of her female socialization as the product simply of a desire to make money or “trick” other people. Especially given Anna’s and Elizabeth’s roles in dressing up Rykener and teaching her that
living as a woman means manipulating sexuality, it is difficult to ascertain how much of Rykener’s learned experiences constitute her own desires for gender presentation.

After having related her initial socialization, Rykener turns to how Elizabeth used her and her own daughter Alice to orchestrate a rather bizarre sexual scenario with male customers; she would bring Alice “to diverse men for the sake of lust, placing her with those men in their beds at night without light, making her leave early in the morning and showing them the said John Rykener dressed up in women’s clothing, calling him Eleanor and saying that they had misbehaved with her” (483). As with Britby’s confession, the pronominal shift from “him” to “her” in regards to Rykener seems not to be an indication of gendered fluidity, but rather a means of deflecting suspicions away from the men who solicited prostitution. While prostitution may have been socially acceptable in certain forms, a legal document likely would not want to appear too eager to endorse it. However, such a reading also assumes that the scribe made the conscious decision, like Britby, to utilize the pronouns that would reflect a situation in which Rykener assumed sole moral responsibility for events. While certainly possible, the transcript similarly could reflect Rykener’s own representation of gender. As I discuss in my introduction to Rykener, applying an identity such as “transgender” to Rykener would be anachronistic and impossible, but Karras and Linkinen’s characterization of her as “transgender-like” seems more appropriate; Elizabeth and Anna may have taught Rykener different modes of femininity, but there is no indication that she was coerced or simply in on it for the covert pleasures of the brothel’s bait and switch. As Karras and Linkinen demonstrate that sartorial markings can be useful indicators of representations of self, it is well within the realm of possibility that Rykener could have sought out such instruction in order to facilitate a better synchronicity between self-identity and external factors. Rykener never gives a reason for Elizabeth’s orchestration of the
sex scenarios involving Rykener and Alice, nor does she give any indication of the men’s responses to her. Elizabeth’s speech to the men in fact raises more questions; in telling the men that they “misbehaved” with Eleanor, perhaps the women were testing out whether or not Eleanor could “pass.” This might account for the lack of response from the men, if Eleanor were indeed passing as Eleanor, but it does seem unlikely that men would worry about having misbehaved with a woman when they deliberately entered a brothel; after all, that generally is the point of visiting a brothel. Whatever the reason for Elizabeth’s exchange of Eleanor for Alice, Rykener’s gendered body is in the spotlight to be read as either female or not.

After having listed Elizabeth’s bait and switch as one of her “libidinous and unspeakable” vices, Rykener tells the court that after having slept with a man named Phillip, rector of Theydon Garnon, she blackmailed him into giving her two dresses under the premise that Rykener’s husband would pursue legal action to get them back for her. As with all of Rykener’s alleged crimes, she does not give any motivation for her actions. Yet given the overall trajectory of her narrative, she moves closer and closer to living the majority of her life as a woman. In reality, the husband that she names to the rector is likely fictional. However, if she were planning the next steps of her life in a job that did not afford the steady income or protection of the organized brothel, having two new dresses and the protection of a husband, fictional as he may have been, would have been invaluable for Rykener. Indeed, the next crime that she confesses is having worked as an embroideress and lived as Eleanor for five weeks in Oxford. Fairly mundane

The twenty-first century concept of “passing” is a complex one. Put simply, to “pass” as a trans person means to be perceived as the gender with which one identifies and not to be read as trans or as the wrong gender. While this might be the goal of many trans people, it is a complicated issue, as “passing” is not possible for everyone and then implies that certain people “do not pass,” thus implicitly devaluing those lives and identities. The word also implies that being cis is the ultimate goal, and that in order to live a viable life, one must be perceived as cis. Further, “passing” is dependent upon being “read” by others, placing control of one’s own life and identity outside the realm of self-determination and in the realm of everyone else’s perception. I want to acknowledge these contemporary issues as I use the term to describe medieval lives; while the words themselves may be anachronistic, the issues surrounding them are not mutually exclusive. Rykener’s navigation of the world depended upon her ability to conform to standards of female beauty and be read as female by those with whom she would have engaged.
actions given her previous confessions of blackmail and the further confessions to come, these actions show her independence; working separately from Elizabeth, she would have had to plan her own provisions and clothing, giving implicit motivation for her blackmail of Phillip. Of course, there is no way to know if the dresses worn in Oxford would have been the same as those purloined from Phillip. However, it’s important to resist the assumption that Rykener did the things she did out of pure greed or folly, or that there would have been no driving motivation for her. While the transcript gives no sense of the outcome of the case, an investigation into someone already labeled a criminal suspect likely would not have been invested in making manifest that suspect’s rationale; rather, keeping the focus on criminality rather than motivation helps ensure a psychological portrait of a deviant rather than an individual.

While in Oxford for those five weeks, she is said to have “practiced the abominable vice” with “three unsuspecting scholars”; although she does not specify exactly what it is that they didn’t suspect, the implication is that they read her as a woman. She names Sir William Foxlee, Sir John, and Sir Walter as her “unsuspecting scholars.” Karras and Boyd note that the title Dominus or Sir often referred to priests, although this, like so much of the case, is a possible rather than definite reading. If the men are in fact priests, though, then these five weeks in Oxford seem to function as something of a turning point for Rykener. The transcript of the trial races through her enumerations of vices and crimes, leaving barely any breathing room between different points in her story. Yet in following the general trajectory, Rykener is originally a pawn, however willing, in Elizabeth Brouderer’s sexual scenarios. By the end of her account, as I will discuss, she has slept with so many priests that she can’t remember them all to give an exact number. These five weeks in Oxford then show a Rykener who is becoming more independent and more confident in her ability to socialize, work, and have sex as a woman.
While Elizabeth’s bait and switch trysts and Rykener’s blackmail of Phillip might seem unmotivated and rather bizarre, they do suggest a gradual move toward Rykener navigating the world nearly full-time as Eleanor, whether or not this move was a consciously planned goal. The lengthy confession goes on to include accounts of money and jewelry exchanged for sexual deeds with two Franciscans, a Carmelite friar, and six foreign men. As I hope is self-evident, it is not my goal to argue that Rykener did not engage in sex work or that she never engaged in any morally suspect or even criminal activity. However, it is important to consider alternative narrative interpretations and possible motivations for her actions that do not rely on stereotypes about women, trans femininity, or the criminalization of sex work.

Rykener’s final two confessions seem to bring to a climax all her criminal activity thus far, as she claims that she’s slept with innumerable nuns, married and unmarried women, and priests:

Rykener further said that he often had sex as a man with many nuns and also had sex as a man with many women both married and otherwise, how many [he] did not know. Rykener further confessed that many priests had committed that vice with him as a woman, how many [he] did not know, and said that [he] accommodated priests more readily than other people because they wished to give [him] more than others. (483)

Rykener’s continual transgression of various boundaries previously showed her gradually leaving behind any vestiges of masculinity, and yet here, she is described as having sex “as a man.” Yet as Karras and Linkinen point out, when men are described as having sex with Rykener “ut cum muliere (‘as with a woman’), [a woman’s] receptive role is all that is implied” (115). They point to this section as potential evidence for Rykener living as a woman for the economic
benefits, as her confession about having sex with women doesn’t include any mention of being paid for it. However, in the larger picture of the gendered wage gap, this is not a likely scenario, and indeed they themselves note this same point, as “it is impossible to conclude this in light of the economic structures and assumptions in medieval Europe, where sex was something that men did to women and therefore not something that women paid for” (115). Considering this point that having sex “as a man” could refer to specific sex acts and not just a description of gender performance, there is no reason why these final confessions would render Rykener’s femininity invalid or a mere ruse. However, as perceived by the courts, these final accounts of transgressions would point to a total dissolution of social norms; even intersex people were expected to perform either masculinity or femininity but never both, which is precisely what Rykener is perceived as doing, regardless of how she may or may not have identified.

Adding extra levels of egregiousness to her perceived crimes are the people with whom she has sex. No longer does her story focus only on the lay men, such as Britby, who approach her in the streets, but now she reports that she’s having sex with the clergy and married women as well. Carolyn Dinshaw writes of Rykener that, by this point, she’s essentially become “a nightmare of the Lollard imagination” (Getting Medieval 101). In a similar manner to how Goldberg’s analysis depicts Rykener as a stand-in for anxieties about social ills, Dinshaw’s characterization of Rykener demonstrates how her sexed and gendered body was used as a lens through which to scrutinize the society around her; with her crimes never explicitly named, her testimony points to the pervasive nature of associating gendered ambiguity and even ambivalence with criminality. Like a litmus test for the kinds of behavior in which a society can engage, Rykener is described in the courts in terms that position her as an aberrance from normative roles; in other words, it’s by depicting her as unabashedly Other and her actions as inconceivable, even ineffable,
violations of the integrity of society that the courts can maintain an image of essentialized normativity.

After these last points, the confession presumably finishes, as the account of the trial cuts off with no further commentary or remarks on the outcome of the trial. The overall trajectory of Rykener’s actions varies broadly from wearing the “wrong” clothes and using the “wrong” name to working the “wrong” jobs to sleeping with the “wrong” people—“wrong” being a convenient term to stand in for transgressing social boundaries. Goldberg conceptualizes of these acts as being linked by Rykener’s being “dishonest” and cheating customers:

Rykener here is represented as a tradesperson who purports to be an embroideress and a barmaid, but actually sells sex. His labour is thus in allowing his body to be used for the sexual gratification of others rather than in honest work. Even as a prostitute he is a dishonest trader: he poses as a woman selling straight sex to male clients, whereas he is in fact a man masquerading as a woman. The sex he sells to his unwitting, and hence cheated customers is in fact anal sex. (50)

While Goldberg contributes important historical research to the study of Rykener’s case, the article utilizes biologically essentialist assumptions, criminalizes and shames sex workers, and recycles misogynist and transmisogynist stereotypes en route to that historicizing work. Rykener certainly was working as a prostitute, but that does not mean that she was not also working as an embroideress and barmaid. Describing the labor of sex work as allowing one’s body to be used implies a definitive passivity, that it is not labor at all, which the juxtaposition with otherwise “honest work” further suggests; in such a description, sex work is portrayed as a dishonest trade in which the workers and not the clients are ethically suspect. The characterization of Rykener as a “man masquerading as a woman” and cheating her customers sounds as if it could have been
lifted right from Janice Raymond’s infamous *The Transsexual Empire*, the foundation of much contemporary anti-transgender stereotypes: “Transsexualism urges us to collude in the falsification of reality—that men can be real women—all in the pretense that transsexualism breaks down the barriers of sex repressiveness, sex role rigidity, and gender itself” (xxiii). Goldberg’s argument does not have the same vitriolic and deliberately transphobic goals as Raymond’s, of course, but its danger lies in its subtle assumptions about the innately dishonest nature of both sex workers and trans women.

*Envisioning a Queer Future*

In moving toward a more inclusive, yet still historicized, understanding of the possibilities for Rykener’s actions and identity, I turn to Gayle Rubin. Her approach to sexuality and criminality provides important insight into the social conceptions that criminalize specific types of sexuality; in proposing how modern societies view sexual practices, Rubin suggests the social sanctioning of a “sex hierarchy” that pits the “charmed circle” against the “outer limits” (153, Fig. 9.1). Included in the “charmed circle” are sex acts considered part of “Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality,” such as acts that are heterosexual, married, procreative, monogamous, and non-commercial. Opposed to the “charmed circle” are the “outer limits,” which includes sex acts considered part of “Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality,” such as acts that are homosexual, unmarried, non-procreative, promiscuous, or commercial. The labeling of Rykener as a dishonest cheat is made possible because of the social conditions, both in her time and the twenty-first-century, that conceive of sex and sexualized acts—such as Rykener wearing a dress and working a female job, which are not sexual acts in and of themselves—as being part of either a “charmed circle” or the “outer limits.” Within such a
framework, the act of wearing a dress and the act of engaging in sex work are both morally suspect and criminalized.

Hundreds of years after Rykener’s and Ronchaia’s cases, women who are trans are still being targeted for violence at increasingly higher rates, and the rhetoric offered up by their attackers, law enforcement agents, and the media echoes much of the rhetoric in the fourteenth-century cases. Police officers interrogating one woman’s killer ask him, “When you found out she wasn’t a woman, but was actually a guy, is that when things went wrong?” Court language describing Rykener and Ronchaia expresses the same tension over assigned sex and gender performance, with the Venetian trial noting about Ronchaia that “many thought him to be female” and John Britby saying about Rykener that he “saw her dressed up as a woman, thinking she was a woman, asking him as he would a woman if he could commit a libidinous act with her.” For Ronchaia, the sodomy charges in the context of fourteenth-century Venice would have been serious even without the issue of her gender presentation. For Rykener, of course, the charges are harder to assess with nothing explicitly named and no sentence or judgment given at the end. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is not to say that the women were not sex workers, which they were, but to resist the tendency to link that sex work with the idea that their gender presentations were somehow deceptive or directly linked to criminal activity. As the subjects of the final chapter of an overall project on how genders have been fantasized in terms of what they can or should be, these cases reflect a simultaneous fascination with and fear of gendered transgressions. In the moments when Ronchaia and Rykener are not described as being engaged in criminal activity, their lives are fairly mundane, and so the transcripts repeatedly suggest the contradiction between the allegedly lurid nature of their crimes and the largely unremarkable lives they lead in a manner other than the sex assigned to them at birth might dictate. Just as

anxieties surrounding sodomy tend to be far more broad-reaching than a specific concern about sex acts, anxieties surrounding these people are far more complicated than a specific concern with how an individual presents their gender.

As Guido Ruggiero contends that fears about sodomy translated into fears that it enabled people to transgress socially prescribed gender roles and undermine the alleged foundation of society, so too does transgressing gender seem to undermine social foundations (“Sexual Criminality” 23). Thus, every mundane moment in the lives of Rykener and Ronchaia, not just the sexually lurid ones, shows that living solely as the gender assigned at birth is not the only way to keep society functioning. Developing and excising a scapegoat is an effective way to deflect social anxieties and reify a sense of communal belonging; transgressing gender categories through living outside one’s assigned sex or engaging in that “detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice” didn’t lead to the collapse of Venetian or London civilization. Yet politicians still attempt to pass—and often do—laws dictating acceptable social practices for the benefit of a properly moral society. However, the Signori di Notte’s campaign to abolish sodomy certainly was not a success, and Venice continues to thrive. Campaigns in the twenty-first-century to keep transgender people in the sex-segregated facilities that align with their assigned sexes will not eradicate transgender people and will not, in turn, lead to the downfall of contemporary society or threaten the much-invoked safety of the women and children. In considering these overall temporal comparisons between the medieval cases and the twenty-first-century, it is important to remain cognizant of how gender roles are sanctioned and policed in order to provide scapegoats to ensure social functioning. Further, these cases should caution readers to remain aware of how the model of the proper citizen is held up to criminalize anyone who transgresses. Rather than recycle the same stereotypes in the legal system and social perception, these transhistorical
comparisons should urge readers to question why those prohibitions failed and how, despite that failure, society didn’t come to a screeching halt; instead of reinforcing the need for scapegoating and criminalizing, these cases point to how ambiguously or transgressively gendered people have and continue to be members of a working society.
In reflecting on the development of this project, I would emphasize how the fields of both medieval studies and gender studies can benefit from investigating their implication in transgender history and studies. Indeed, the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* lists “Medieval” as one of the emergent fields keywords, listing a host of figures that likely are familiar to most students and scholars of medieval studies, including Silence of the *Roman de Silence*, the Hermaphroditus tradition of Ovid, Joan of Arc, the bearded saints, and grammatical concepts of transgressive gender and intersexuality, perhaps such as Alain of Lille’s *De Planctu naturae* (Whittington 125-28). The author’s approach undoubtedly emphasizes how medieval literature, theology, philosophy, and medicine represented literary figures and scientific concepts. Similarly, my approach has been to consider transgressive and ambiguous genders as they are represented in a range of genres, from the sacred to the secular and those genres that, like gender, are too complex to be categorized simply as sacred or secular.

Much skepticism of medieval representations of heresy charges them with bias; by looking for the existence of heresy, authority figures read through words of alleged confessants specifically for evidence of crime, thus creating a picture of heresy that may not have existed, such as was the case with the Cathars discussed in Chapter Three and the fourteenth-century court cases discussed in Chapter Five. My fascination and frustration with reading inevitably biased texts (after all, all texts have biases) grew while reading these medieval representations of transgressively or ambiguously gendered subjects alongside contemporary mainstream media reports on topics concerning trans identity; the manners of representation seemed to overlap so much as to be contemporaneous with each other, verging as they did on reading bodies through medicalized and diagnostic viewpoints and reading performed genders through the lens of
deception and sexual licentiousness. Thus, Whittington’s outline of the possibilities for medieval studies’ contributions to transgender studies points to possibilities for resisting stereotypes that the Middle Ages were characterized by “an outmoded or unenlightened viewpoint, a realm of fantasy fairytales, or the medieval S/M aesthetic of torture, dungeons, and chains” (125). Such an intervention rightfully asks contemporary audiences to reconsider how medieval audiences might have viewed possibilities for gender beyond the restrictive stereotypes often associated with the Middle Ages. My project, too, considers the ways that medieval subjectivities performed a broad variety of gender possibilities. Specifically, I call attention to the notion of progress and the narrative of trans liberation as being in distinction to our allegedly more restrictive, more “medieval,” if you will, history. Reading through the representations of medieval transgressive genders alongside contemporary representations suggests how modern audiences, too, can reconsider possibilities for gendered subjectivity, rather than accept a narrative that proposes we live in a post-trans-liberation world; indeed, there’s still much work to do before we can claim true equality for all genders, including those who are trans, women, femme, and so on. Indeed, there is significant overlap between characterizations of such medieval figures as Eleanor Rykener and Rolandina Ronchaia and contemporary media representations of women who are trans; both medieval and contemporary representations suggest that they are deceptive of men and disguise themselves for ease of sexual access and economic benefit.

I initially discuss Muñoz’s conceptions of utopia-making alongside the Pardoner, suggesting that his continually frustrated desires place him at odds with Muñoz’s concept of a queer future. Muñoz suggests that queerness is “primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always on the horizon” (11); the Pardoner, instead, might help imagine possibilities, but they are possibilities of the present. I revisit Muñoz’s ideas alongside such
figures as Ronchaia and Rykener by way of conclusion to imagine the kind of future that their own court cases might suggest. The criminal context of their documents compounded by Ronchaia’s death sentence might make it a more obvious choice to consider a less optimistic view of the power and potential of queerness. Yet if queerness is “always on the horizon” (Muñoz 11), then we can, with Sedgwick, read these cases reparatively, and be motivated by “pleasure and amelioration” (*Touching Feeling* 144). Weismantel’s proposal that we approach the archive with rage to uncover “layers of unsupported assumptions about sex and gender that encrust the archaeological record” allows for readings that resist accepting the biases of allegedly normative sex and gendered embodiment that nuance the presentation of subjects in this dissertation’s different genres (320). Imagining a queer future through subjects like Albina, Ronchaia, Rykener, perhaps even the Pardoner and Sir Gowther, suggests how gender can be navigated and performed to reject untenable conditions and to construct a world on one’s own terms. While envisioning the Pardoner’s future likely results in an individualistic and sinful, yet delightful, image, doing so nonetheless suggests a methodology of restructuring life on one’s own terms. Sir Gowther manipulates his human-canine performativity to shape his life according to the terms he has come to internalize as properly civilized, human, and Christian, incorporating himself into the society whose social norms he previously violated egregiously. While both Eugene and Silence are reconstructed as female by their text’s conclusions, their deft maneuvering of gendered categories not only to survive, but to thrive as male suggests the queer potential of transgressing gender and creating for oneself a different social position.

Albina, Ronchaia, and Rykener seem to suggest the most radical possibilities for a new future. It is possible to argue that Albina represents a stereotype of feminine deception, considering that she does, of course, attempt to orchestrate the mass-murder of her and her
sisters’ husbands. Yet her future, at the beginning of the story, is defined by that trajectory that her marriage will bring—inevitable subordination to a man she knows is less noble than she. Regardless of the morality of murder, her attempt at self-liberation and subsequent survival and reconstruction of a world for herself and her sisters suggests the “futurity and hope” of the new world; they may disappear from their narrative after demons rape them and giants continue their society, Brutus and Corineus may slay all the giants and make way for humans, tribe after tribe will conquer each other in the long history of Britain, but “queerness is always on the horizon” (Muñoz 11). Indeed, Eleanor Rykener comes to navigate the same island as Albina and the giants by the fourteenth century, constructing for herself a place in the world where she can maneuver gender as a means of performance and perhaps identity. Rolandina Ronchaia’s resounding refusal to recant the truth of her confession or to resume life as a man sends a far more powerful message for a queer future than does the note of her sentencing and execution.

In considering how all these texts work together—historiographies, romances, hagiography, Chaucerian poetry, and even the court cases—, all present fantasies about what it means to navigate social demands in a body whose gendered presentation and performance is informed both by self-presentation and by external expectations for it. This model of constructing gender can, of course, be true for mostly any character or person, including those whose gender performance aligns with the sex category assigned at birth. The transgressively gendered subjects I have discussed represent a dissonance between that self-presentation and external expectations and perceptions. Sometimes that dissonance is resolved to bring the individual back into the social fold, as is the case with romances, and sometimes that dissonance remains profoundly troubling in its own context, as is the case with the legal trials. Investigating this history about what it means to fantasize gender, and what it means to navigate gender,
contributes to a fuller understanding of how identities have developed from a broad range of historical perspectives—this includes not only normative subjectivities, but also those queer identities developing outside of normative standards. We cannot investigate history as if it were a teleological progression toward cisgender-as-standard. To do so would be to ignore the potential of gendered transgression and ambiguity represented by characters such as Silence and Eugene, who maneuver bodily performance to represent a self that feels most natural to them, whether that is Silence’s social masculinity or Eugene’s spiritual masculinity. To imagine a queer future alongside these texts means to follow Ronchaia’s dedication to speaking the truth—in distinction to confessing—and reclaiming and reconfiguring images of aberrance or transgression for their potential to help create conditions for viable personhood. That future acknowledges many models of gender presentation in both historical texts and contemporary societies, recognizing myriad possibilities for past, present, and future genders including and also beyond those named male and female.
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