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Gender-Expansive Identity in the Christian Medieval Era

The western push for transgender rights and awareness is fairly recent, including the vocabulary that has shaped it. Terms that have developed in the past 50 years, including transgender, nonbinary, gender non-conforming, and more have given validity and agency to groups of people largely left out of western history. As traditional ideas of gender are challenged and redefined, scholars have looked to the past, reexamining artwork and text for meanings that have been left out of academic conversation for centuries. This effort has become known as “queering” history, and it works in tandem with intersectional approaches examining other overlooked subjects like race and the patriarchy.¹ Even queer examinations, however, have purportedly avoided and ignored trans perspectives, willing to accept historical figures as gay or crossdressers but not transgender.²

The Medieval age represents the wide adoption of Christianity across western Europe. First through art and illuminated manuscripts to a mostly illiterate population, then through translation and mass printing, the teachings of God defined the day-to-day lives of Medieval persons. Christianity set societal expectations for what it meant to be man or woman, giving guidance as to their required traits and roles. While Medieval Christian texts and artworks mostly

¹ Doyle, Maeve K. “Mysticism and queer readings of Christ’s Side Wound in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg,” in Smarthistory, June 29, 2020, smarthistory.org/jean-le-noir-bourgot-miniature-of-christ-wound-passion-prayer-book-bonne-luxembourg/.

² Henningsen, Kadin. ““Calling [herself] Eleanor”: Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case.” Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 55, No. 1 (2019): 249-266, pp. 1-2.

enforced a stringent gender binary, the religious institution of monasticism featured roles that allowed for more expansive expressions of gender.

It is key to first understand how men and women were expected to behave based on their sex assigned at birth before unpacking the ways these rules were broken. From early Christianity onward—pre-Medieval times—women were considered inferior. First century philosopher Philo of Alexandria wrote: ““the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought.””³ Philo’s use of the words “corporeal” and “incorporeal” harken to biblical canon in which Eve is tempted by the serpent to sin. Her actions catalyze the punishment of the entire female gender; women are relegated to a lower position while men retain their piety. As Roland Betancourt puts it in *Byzantine Intersectionality*, “sensuality and sexuality [are] introduced by the feminine,”⁴ and the feminine are henceforth defined by such. Women were also expected to be caretakers, marrying young and raising children. In Nikephoros Basilakes’ twelfth-century critique of the pagan story of huntress Atalanta, he laments on the woman’s mother for failing to ““train [her] right up to her wedding day.””⁵ Due to this, Atalanta learned male vocations such as hunting, which should be reserved for a man’s active nature, as stated by Philo earlier.

As established by Basilakes’ disapproval, gender performances once acceptable during Classical Antiquity—an already limiting age—were out of line in Medieval Christianity. Betancourt provides a myriad of biblical texts, imperial law codes, and church council rules that state in no uncertain terms that no woman should dress in men’s clothes or don male haircuts.⁶ Nonconformity represented the strange and immoral; one example of this are bestiary

³ Betancourt, Roland. *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 97.

⁴ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 98.

⁵ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 119.

⁶ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 99.

descriptions of the spotted hyena. Bestiaries, illustrated books with descriptions of animals, were not meant to scientifically observe nature as much as moralize it through Christian contexts. Their stories functioned more like fables, giving lessons on how a Christian could best interact with the world. Hyenas were an animal subject to frequent demonization. Since they were known to eat carcasses, they were labeled unclean, but Christian abhorrence went deeper than that. As Emma Campbell explains, “the external genitalia of spotted hyenas are virtually identical in all members of the species.”⁷ While female hyenas have extended clitori and not penises, this was unknown to Medieval scribes, who often illustrated them with both a penis and vulva opening visible. In fact, it was believed that hyenas were double-sexed; this representation can be seen in Figure 1, where a hyena attacks a human corpse. The choice to depict the creature attacking a human and not a fellow animal could help further the repulsion of the reader, primed to understand it as immoral without the assistance of the text. Hyenas were additionally understood as capable of changing sex. The common denominator between interpretations was that this dual nature could be understood as representing duplicity. This sin was leveled against groups like Jews, who were seen as having abandoned God to worship idols and engage in gluttonous living. The tropological message was clear: to defy a defined category, either by occupying multiple or switching between them, was associated with “avarice, covetousness, and lecherousness.”⁸

Gender-expansive figures were othered and made spectacle of in far more literal cases, such as the manuscript *Marvels of the East*. This text featured the fantastical creatures that supposedly lied outside of western bounds; while some figures were humanoid and others beastly, all were “monstrous races.”⁹ Figure 2 shows the nonbinary-sexed figure in *Marvels*.

⁷ LaFleur, Greta, et al. *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*. Cornell University Press, 2021, pp. 236.

⁸ LaFleur, Greta, et al, pp. 246.

⁹ LaFleur, Greta, et al, pp. 29.

They appear to have long hair and a beard, with one masculine breast and one feminine, and are described as ‘hermaphrodites.’ It is said that they “switched between male and female roles in generation,” taking on the jobs of both mother and father. This would be a failure of Christian standards in child-rearing, the same as Atalanta, who was socialized in both masculine and feminine spaces. The job of the parent is to sequester their children into male and female spaces: “as soon as an infant is born a woman and goes into the light, at the same time she enters the women’s quarter,” Basilake declared.¹⁰ A text like *Marvels* has a job in some ways similar to that of the bestiary: to separate wrongs from rights. Unlike the bestiary, however, no detailed textual analysis must be performed; no morals must be declared. By opening a book of monsters from another world, a reader is indulging with the odd and alien, expecting a twisted, inhuman tale to be told to them. The message is clear already—these are “‘the boundaries beyond which humans should not proceed.’”¹¹

If these boundaries are outlined in such great detail, with every text of the time interspersed with Christian messaging, in what contexts could such rules be broken? Ironically, while Christianity defined the rules of gender, it offered an escape—greater involvement and deeper devotion.

Monkhood was one of few available safe havens for transmasculine and gender non-conforming persons to live as and pass as their identified gender. Today, transmasculine people have access to gender-affirming care such as hormones and surgery, which can make them socially indistinguishable from cisgender men if they choose to pursue such options. The development of masculine secondary sex characteristics was impossible for a medieval person assigned female at birth, but the existence of eunuchs gave them a way to feasibly pass. Eunuchs

¹⁰ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 118.

¹¹ LaFleur, Greta, et al, pp. 29.

were men who were castrated. If this practice occurred before the onset of puberty, which it often did, masculine sex characteristics like skeletal and muscular development as well as facial and body hair would not develop.¹² Eunuchs were often looked down upon for their lack of masculine features, which placed them in a class similar to women. As Basil of Caesarea said, ““The race of eunuchs [is] without honor, and utterly forsaken - and this indeed they are: unfemale, unmale...””¹³ The idea that they lacked honor came from the notion that eunuchs had “cheated” their way into virtuosity due to a lack of sex drive, yet Basil also claimed them to be “mad for women” and unable to control their material desires. Criticism of eunuchs is full of contradiction, as their femininity made them supposedly similar to women, yet they were said to desire women nonetheless. However, not all eunuchs were looked down upon in such a fashion; they were not uncommon in monasteries and capable of receiving sainthood.

Those assigned female at birth who lived stealthily as eunuch monks that we know of had their lives recounted in hagiographies. *Lives* told the stories of figures worthy of admiration by fellow Christians, which is interesting to consider in the context of how they lived outside of the gender binary. One way to explain their good reputation despite breaking many rules of Christianity would be their commitment to asceticism. St. Esmarade, originally known as Eufrosine, was meant to take part in an arranged marriage but wanted to instead maintain their chastity. They made the decision to pose as a Eunuch and enter a monastery where they remained until their death. Only when preparing for their funeral do their fellow monks realize their sex, and they are henceforth treated as a woman.¹⁴ Perhaps such a story was meant to show how commitment to God comes before all else, and therefore Esmarade’s actions can be venerated.

¹² Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt, editors. *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*. Amsterdam University Press, 2021. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ks0cj4, pp. 157.

¹³ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt, pp. 115.

¹⁴ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt, pp. 156-168.

What if, though, a transmasculine monk's chosen gender identity was respected after their death? Anastasius similarly joined a monastery as a eunuch hoping to escape the attention of a man: the emperor of Justonian. However, his abbot, Daniel of Sketis, was aware of his birth identity. In one version of the story, Anastasius begs Daniel to keep his assigned sex hidden after his death. In another, a fellow monk discovers his sex in preparing his body for funeral and inquires to Daniel about it, notably doing so in private. Daniel tells them that he was aware of Anastasius' identity, but continues to refer to him as male, saying: "Let us pray then, my son, that the Lord may hold us worthy of the same course and way of life... and together with this father and brother Anastasios the eunuch, may we be worthy of the kingdom that does not pass away."¹⁵ Not only does Daniel respect Anastasius' identity, he praises him with gendered terminology, declaring him worthy of heaven.

In both of these cases, gender-nonconforming figures are able to live undetected up until their deaths, and these are the stories that not only got written, but survived hundreds of years to be documented in the modern day. We cannot begin to estimate the actual number of transmasculine people who were able to survive like this, perhaps even remaining undiscovered after their death, having the privilege of living a completely ordinary life. Certainly, monkhood provided the safe haven that took them away from people already aware of their assigned sex and into a world where they could redefine themselves, and the existence of eunuchs allowed them to pass without any male secondary sex characteristics.

For persons assigned male at birth, there was no equivalent role to the eunuch that would allow them to exist undetected. People who exhibit transfeminine traits are much rarer in Medieval Christian texts, which is undoubtedly related to the rampant misogyny of the time. Females who practiced chastity were venerated seemingly for recognizing the lustful flaws of the

¹⁵ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 103.

feminine gender, and their choice to abstain from sin brought them closer to masculinity, which could be celebrated in religious contexts. Men had no reason or excuse to engage in the feminine, as it was understood as inherently below masculinity.

However, abbacy provided an unusual exception to this rule. As man and woman were created in God's name, it was much more acceptable to associate Christ with feminine and masculine traits. Therefore abbots, believed to be an extension of God's will, could explore this gender-expansive identity within their religious role.

In the effort to queer history, historians have found that "Christ's body often takes on feminine qualities, becoming permeable, generative, and nourishing."¹⁶ This is particularly notable in the writings and illustrations of Christ's side wound. Figure 4 shows one of these illustrations from a prayer book, which were meant to be portable and personal, this one measuring five inches in height. The owner is encouraged to have an intimate relationship with God through their book, invited to engage in a tactile manner. Notably, this depiction of the wound is vertical and elongated, resembling a vulva.

This feminine and erotic understanding of Christ can be further explored through the writings of abbots such as St. Bernard, who refers to him directly as "mother," praising him for sheltering the dead under his "wings". However, Bernard also projects this role onto himself: "Why will the young man, bitten by the serpent, shy away from the judgment of the priest, to whom he ought rather to run as to the bosom of a mother?" In fact, he believes that the abbot should "show affection as a mother would" and "correct like a father."¹⁷ Taking on the roles of both mother and father was directly condemned in *Marvels of the East* as unfamiliar and

¹⁶ Doyle, Maeve K.

¹⁷ Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 70, no. 3/4, 1977, pp. 257–84. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/1509631](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1509631), pp. 263.

immoral. However, operating as an extension of God, abbots seemed to avoid such charges altogether. Because God existed spiritually, beyond human binary, the trait could be seen as emulating Christ rather than reaching outside the bounds of one's gender.

While Bernard took on dual parental roles, St. Francis seemed focused specifically on the mother, giving them more grounds to be interpreted as possibly transfeminine. Author Kevin Elphick writes how they “[failed] at the role of warrior, and intentionally [divested themselves] of other male roles of [their] day.”¹⁸ In St. Bonaventure’s thirteenth-century writings about Francis, he portrays them as the bride from the biblical poem “Song of Songs,” saying how they “‘followed [their] Beloved everywhere’ and ensured that Jesus ‘always rested like a bundle of myrrh in the bosom of Francis’s soul.’”¹⁹ Beyond St. Francis’ own writings, they are interpreted by other saints not just as motherly but specifically feminine. Assuredly, the context of being the “bride” to Christ permits behavior that would otherwise be mocked as queer, something Medieval writers were fully willing to leverage against feminine men of their time.²⁰ Being in the abbacy functioned as insurance against claims that one was too womanly—instead, they could claim they were greatly pious, emulating God to their best ability.

Because the transgender rights movement is fairly recent, many westerners think that transness itself is new. This is a racist, Eurocentric idea that undermines the validity of other cultures; focusing on solely western concepts of gender will not give one the full scope of what gender-expansiveness has looked like as a whole throughout all of human society. Our current understandings of transness in a world greatly bent on eradicating its existence are surely not perfect labels that will go unchanged; that is to say, the goal of an essay like this is not to assign

¹⁸ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt, pp. 92.

¹⁹ Spencer-Hall, Alicia, and Blake Gutt, pp. 93.

²⁰ LaFleur, Greta, et al, pp. 304.

gender to those who never got the chance to speak for themselves. As Roland Betancourt saliently asserts about Byzantine identity:

“The fact is that there were people in the Byzantine Empire who were trans and who, even if they did not have the critical vocabulary to self-identify as such or have their voices recorded, were nevertheless still trans. To deny these realities is to be complicit with violence—both physical and rhetorical—not just in the past but also in the present.”²¹

Rather than focusing on whether we are “wrong” or “right” in our identifications, we should ask ourselves this: how did gender non-conforming people exist during this time? Where did they go, what did they do; what were the limited ways that they were permitted to live their realities? In a world of rigidity, where could they bend without breaking? When studying history, we work with stories that feel like fragments, stories that some would claim to not be solid enough evidence of trans existence. Perhaps, when we consider the world back then and the one we live in today, we can recognize that going upon this journey would have never yielded the results that certain people would require to acquiesce a reality that they have no desire to believe in. Focusing on giving validity to those who need to hear it, in this case those practicing Christianity who may feel they have no right to exist, is what queering history should be about.

²¹ Betancourt, Roland, pp. 17.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Hyena attacking a corpse in *The Ashmole Bestiary*.

Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library,

digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/faeff7fb-f8a7-44b5-95ed-cff9a9ffd198/.



Fig. 2. Nonbinary-sexed figure (left) in *Marvels of the East*.

Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library,

digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/a43be554-c5b0-42f0-94e0-70222bb2a964/



Fig. 3. The Wound of Christ in *The Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg*.

Source: The Met, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471883.

