Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography

Gutt, Blake, Spencer-Hall, Alicia

Published by Amsterdam University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83299

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2845034
10 The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints

*Imago Dei* and *imitatio Christi* in the *Life* of St Marinos the Monk

M.W. Bychowski

Abstract
In this chapter, the author unpacks an entry in Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Transvestites* (1910) on the *Life* of St Marinos the Monk to argue that his theories of the soul may be useful to flip the understanding of medieval trans saints from a frame of cisgender artifice, fears and desires to the frame of authenticity. In the process, the tradition of describing the subjects of these hagiographies as ‘transvestite’ saints is thoroughly critiqued by critically historicizing and reclaiming the term. *Imago transvesti* and *imitatio transvesti* are proposed as theoretical lenses that combine the medieval discourses of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Christi* with insights from trans studies in order to improve our understanding of medieval transgender saints.

Keywords: transgender, saints, transvestites, hagiography, medieval, monks

From the beginning, trans studies has invoked the lives of medieval saints. In a foundational ‘trans’ text, *Transvestites (Die Transvestiten)* (1910), Magnus Hirschfeld drew from medieval hagiography to historicize the phenomenon he calls ‘transvestitism’. In current usage, ‘transvestite’ is synonymous with ‘cross-dresser’ – someone who wears clothing associated with another gender – and has largely diminished in usage as it is considered out of date...
or derogatory. Yet in 1910, the word ‘transvestite’ was new, and had not yet developed its more narrow or negative connotations. Indeed, the word was intended to combat confusing associations with other traits or populations. In his book-length study, Hirschfeld describes a distinct population of people that differ from the homosexuals, narcissists, and schizophrenics with whom they too often lumped: transvestites. While focusing on clothing as a key marker of trans-ness in defining his term ‘transvestite’, Hirschfeld seems to use the term more broadly to refer to a wider group of people, akin to how ‘trans’ or ‘transgender’ is used today. Based on his articulation of trans theory to examine pre-modern saints, Hirschfeld may be considered not only one of the founders of transgender studies in general, but also of medieval transgender studies specifically.

Among the lives he examines from the ancient to the modern world to define his term for trans-ness, Hirschfeld considers the case of St Marinos the Monk:

There was a widespread legend during the Middle Ages about Saint Marina. When her father Eugenius became a monk, she put on men’s clothing herself, so that she could become a monk and go with him. She changed her name to Marius [or, in other versions of the text, to Marinos]. As such she was supposed to have produced a child and was cast out. She did not defend herself but took the child as her own. Only after her death did her sex come to light.

The story that Hirschfeld gives is concise but hits many of the main points which medieval versions of the *Life of St Marinos* (also known as *St Mary, Marina, and/or Marius*) expand. The story begins with the father, Eugenius, who leaves his child to join a monastery. The child advocates to become a

---

59 See ‘Cross-Dress; Cross-Dressing; Cross-Dresser’ and ‘Transvestite; Transvestism’ in the Appendix: pp. 291-92, 322.

60 While Hirschfeld acknowledges that transvestites should be allowed to transition and be affirmed in their identified gender, in case studies he regularly chooses not to use the preferred pronouns of the trans person. For instance, while using Marinos as an example of trans masculinity, Hirschfeld uses she/her pronouns and identifies the saint as female. Various reasons might be cited for Hirschfeld’s decision not to use the preferred pronouns (or: pronouns reflecting the individual’s identified gender), including his audience. Because Hirschfeld was among the first to define a ‘trans’ condition within modern medicine, he was addressing an audience that would likely be sceptical, unfamiliar with trans persons, and easily confused. Thus, while he used terms that would have been more familiar with his audience in 1910, I will use the preferred pronouns of the trans person or character under consideration, following current standards in the wake of transgender studies. Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, pp. 307-08; *Die Transvestiten*, p. 404.
monk as well, despite having been assigned female at birth. Subsequently, the child, who takes the name Marinos, lives as an exceptional monk until he is expelled from the monastery for a time, after being accused by a woman of impregnating her, a charge upheld by the woman’s father and the Superior of the monastery. After some time waiting outside the monastery, Marinos’s conviction convinces the Superior to let him back into the brotherhood, where he raises the child born to the woman until the end of his life. After his death, Marinos’s genitals are revealed – demonstrating his inability to impregnate a woman – and the slander against him proven false.

In the brief Hirschfeld version, Marinos is invoked as evidence in an argument for ‘transvestitism’ as a distinct and authentic state of being, an argument which posits transition (especially by means of clothing) as key to revealing the deep-seated gender of the trans soul. While later studies of medieval trans saints invoke the term ‘transvestite’ without sufficient attention to Hirschfeld’s analysis, the Life of St Marinos reveals how trans hagiography can ground and expand key elements in the affirmative conceptualization of ‘transvestitism’. The use and connotation of the terms ‘transvestism’ or ‘transvestitism’ in medieval studies largely seems to fall into the problems outlined in this volume’s Usage Guide, functioning as a synonym for ‘cross-dresser’, ‘founded upon the perception that trans individuals wear clothing associated with the ‘opposite’ assigned sex/gender, when they are in fact wearing clothing associated with their identified gender’. Thus, although Transvestites is more a work of early psychology than of history or theology, I argue that Hirschfeld’s framing of St Marinos is helpful in re-theorizing and reclaiming ‘transvestitism’ in ways that further our understanding of medieval transgender saints as figures embodying and inspiring authentic lives.

Authenticity is a core characteristic of a healthy psyche claims Character Strengths and Virtues, a text designed by psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman to be a positive companion and antithesis to the ‘Bible’ of psychology, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM has been used as a weapon to pathologize, hospitalize, and exclude trans people from society by marking them as disordered. Yet

---

61 Hirschfeld, Transvestites, p. 274.
62 Examples of such scholarship is legion but a few examples that use the word ‘transvestite’ without interrogating the term (especially in relation to Hirschfeld’s own analysis of medieval saints) include: Constan, ‘Life’, pp. 1-12; Hotchkiss, Clothes, p. 15, p. 131; Daston and Park, ‘The Hermaphrodite’, p. 133; Margolis, ‘Mortal Body’, p. 18.
63 Appendix, p. 322.
64 Peterson and Seligman, Character Strengths, pp. 249-73.
it has also been instrumental in facilitating both medical transition, such as hormone replacement therapy, and legal transition, such as correcting one’s birth certificate. By theorizing trans saints through the lens of authenticity rather than fantasy or disguise, we flip historical associations of trans life from a sin to a virtue, and from a disorder to a strength. The term ‘authentic lives’ is shared (sometimes with trepidation) as a critical phrase in both contemporary transgender and psychological parlance. Stephan Joseph defines the concept this way: ‘Authentic people know themselves. They are able to listen to their inner voice – their gut – and to understand the complexities of their feelings and hear their own inner wisdom. The authentic person will not let others blind them to their own truth’. In key ways, the goal of Hirschfeld’s Transvestites was to help people live authentic lives. He noticed that the gendered images and impacts of the world were harming a group of people (whom he called transvestites) whose authentic lives would require them to live differently. In citing Marinos, Hirschfeld recognizes how saints – especially trans saints – strive to live authentically, and the fact that this internal drive for authenticity calls them to also live differently.

Indeed, medieval hagiography is a genre regularly discussed in scholarly conversations about the work of authenticity. As Amy V. Ogden explains, a broad analysis of medieval hagiography demonstrates how the genre appeals to a wide range of audiences by using a wide range of lives whose stories are told using a wide range of styles. This means that a saint whose Life seems relatively obscure and marginal, such as a trans saint, serves the wider goals of hagiography because their story speaks to the authenticity of people whose way of being might likewise be considered obscure or marginal. Whereas the authenticity of cisgender saints is readily recognized as a feature of hagiography by cisgender readers, the authenticity of trans saints might be missed or misrecognized as a problematic deception by cisgender readers of trans hagiography. By considering trans saints as authentically trans within contexts in which this authenticity is challenged by cisgender social norms, trans hagiography may be taken as exemplary of the genre’s proclivity for advocating authenticity as a value for all people, whether cis or trans. Medieval trans saints, just like medieval cis saints, listened to what Joseph calls ‘inner wisdom’ (or what both Hirschfeld and medieval religious writers would call the ‘soul’) as they took steps to embody their

67 Ogden, ‘Centrality’, pp. 2–3.
authentic lives. The authenticity of trans saints led them to be affected by and to impact others, through inspiration or imitation.

Additionally, by focusing on, and moving beyond, the case study of St Marinos presented in Hirschfeld’s *Transvestites*, this chapter responds to a tradition in medieval studies of describing pre-modern persons as ‘transvestites’ or ‘cross-dressers’. A touchstone example at the intersection of early-/pre-modern studies and ‘transvestitism’ studies is Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992). While the understanding of ‘transvestitism’ in such works varies, the trans-ness of saints is generally regarded as somehow important both to medieval studies and medieval people. As Stephen J. Davis asserts, ‘transvestitism […] is the unmistakable “sign” or image that links this group of hagiographical narratives.’ For medieval studies, transvestitism has been useful in linking a host of texts, literary characters, and historical persons. Furthermore, citing around a dozen trans hagiographies that blossomed from the ninth to eleventh century in a ‘revival of the genre’, Davis argues that awareness of transvestitism seems more than a modern imposition, ‘suggest[ing] that the hagiographers actually presumed that their ancient readers were already acquainted with other “texts” – other discourses – that would have helped make sense of the trans motif within these saints’ lives.’ While Davis does not fully specify what ‘other texts’ were available, this collection, and medieval trans studies in general, works to fill out the range of trans discourses and lives present to pre-modern people. Nonetheless, there is a variation in the familiarity with, and affirmation of, trans-ness evident in both medieval texts and modern medieval studies through inconsistencies in pronoun choice, or the willingness to retain the expressed gender identity of the trans figure in one respect but not in others. To make this inconsistency in medieval texts and modern translations legible, I have not corrected the passages on Marinos cited in this chapter which acknowledge that he lived as a man from transition until death and yet use female pronouns for him.

In medieval studies, variation in familiarity with trans theory is evident in the persistent and regular use of the word ‘transvestite’, a term that has been considered outdated in trans studies for some time. The term is often used while eschewing the historical trans person’s identified gender in favour of that ascribed by cis-essentialist scribes or scholars. For instance,

---

68 See also Garber, *Vested Interests*; Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing*; Bullough, ‘Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change’, pp. 223-42.

69 Davis, ‘Crossed Texts’, p. 15.

70 Ibid., p. 16.
Marinos is frequently dead-named as ‘Mary’ or ‘Marina’ despite the fact that he personally chose the name ‘Marinos’, and is referred to with she/her pronouns, despite that fact that he lived as a ‘he/him’-using man for most of his life.71 Furthermore, the conventional use of the early twentieth-century diagnostic category of ‘transvestite’ is ironic, since use of the term ‘transgender’ to describe pre-modern people is decried as anachronistic because this word did not exist in the Middle Ages.72 Cis scholars seem at times to prefer their own anachronisms to the supposed anachronisms of trans scholarship.

Yet my point is not simply to say, ‘don’t use that word’ – although the uninformed and unexplained use of the word ‘transvestite’ should be discouraged – nor to regard the pre-modern silence on medieval trans-ness as disallowing any words (‘transvestite’ or ‘transgender’) which help articulate the unarticulated.73 Rather, I contend that when medieval studies’ scholars describe ‘transvestites’, they may tap into an unrecognized well of potential knowledge about trans life and history. We must understand the past in its own terms but we must also recognize that we can know the past better in some respects through the insights gained after later experience and reflection.74 To this end, I propose two ways of theorizing medieval transvestite saints: imago transvesti and imitatio transvesti. In coining these phrases, I purposefully blend two traditions of Latin: the language of the medieval church (represented by Marinos), and the language of modern medicine (represented by Hirschfeld). This medieval and modern trans amalgam emphasizes an intentional theoretical and critical use of terms like ‘transvestite’, in contrast to the word’s inaccurate and uncritical application elsewhere in medieval studies. In other works, including a forthcoming piece on the ‘transgender turn’, I offer a more in depth critique of what I identify as ‘the cisgender turn’ to medieval studies and transvestite history, characterized by cisgender scholars enacting compulsory cisgender identity assignment and framing trans-ness primarily as a product of or disruption to cis culture.75 In this current piece, however, my goal is to locate within the early end of the Middle Ages and the early end of modern trans studies a generative and distinctly trans contribution to our reading of sainthood, authenticity, and the soul.

71 See ‘Dead Name; Dead-Naming; Dead Name’ in the Appendix: p. 292.
73 See ‘Transvestite; Transvestism’ in the Appendix: p. 322.
74 See Žižek, ‘History’.
75 Bychowski, ‘Transgender Turn’.
To provide a more complex historical examination of the intersection of Hirschfeld's conceptions of transvestitism and the Life of St Marinos, I will consider different parts of the Life from a tenth-century Athonite manuscript, believed to be closest in style and content to the earliest versions of the hagiography. While the Marinos hagiographic tradition can be traced to between the fifth and ninth centuries, the exact dates and locations of the saint’s life are unknown. It has been suggested that Marinos lived in fifth-century Syria, possibly near Tripoli. The text examined here is a Greek-language version of the Life found in a tenth-century text preserved in three Athonite manuscripts (Mount Athos being a significant center of monastic life), later published and named the vita antiqua by M. Richard. The English translation of the vita antiqua used here is by Nicholas Constas. The introduction to Constas’s translation repeats the argument that the vita antiqua is the closest to the original version of the Life of St Marinos. I have selected this early version since it contains elements that later versions often abridge. Later versions tend to remove much of the dialogue, including the debate between Marinos and his father as to the theological grounding for his transition into monkhood. This conversation, present in the vita antiqua, may be considered a fiction, yet it attests to the ways early hagiographers imagined Marinos’s relation to God and his understanding of his place in Creation, providing details of imago transvesti. This vita also gives more detail on crucial steps in the plot than later abridged versions, allowing a closer reading of habits that would provide imitatio transvesti for later trans hagiographies – inspiring trans saints, or at least trans narratives.

In the next section, I will approach the imago transvesti of St Marinos as reflecting a form of imago Dei, a tradition in Christianity that states that each person is made in God’s image and which is identifiable in medieval trans hagiography. This tradition becomes clearer by understanding Hirschfeld’s transvestite principle of the ‘unconscious projection of the soul’ (‘unbewusste Projektion der Seele’). In a chapter from Transvestites entitled ‘Clothing
as a Form of Expression of Mental Conditions’, Hirschfeld argues that the clothing which the trans person wears as part of their transition may not be – as others would misidentify it – a disguise or facsimile of a foreign gender, but rather may be a revelation of the gender experienced by the transgender soul. He calls on readers to ask ‘to what extent we recognize [...] the essence of the clothing as symbol, as unconscious projection of the soul’. The notion of the ‘unconscious projection of the soul’ may thus be considered analogous to the pre-modern conception of the imago Dei which would have been active during the life of many trans saints, and during the reception of their hagiographies in the medieval period. Thus, reflecting pre-modern theory and medieval faith, imago transvesti names trans figures responding to the model of the imago Dei, whose authentic lives seem to arise from projections of an internal source.

Subsequently, imitatio transvesti is explored as the way in which trans saints enact a specific kind of imitatio Christi, and the way in which they inspire others to bring forth truths that are otherwise obscured, punished, or marginalized by the images of the world, imagines mundi. In my usage of the term, imagines mundi critically name the socially assigned images of the self which contrast with those made by God, associated with the imago Dei. This characteristic of trans saints may be recognized through an understanding of Hirschfeld’s notion of transvestite ‘soul-impact’ or ‘soul affect’ (‘Seelen-Einschlag’). In his chapter ‘Women as Soldiers’, Hirschfeld considers the potential case of trans men in the military, driven by ‘der männliche Seelen-Einschlag’, translated by Michael A. Lombardi-Nash as the ‘very substantial admixture of the manly soul’. This phrase may be translated more directly as ‘male soul-impact’. The conjunction of ‘Seele’ (soul) with ‘Einschlag’ (impact/admixture) suggests that the soul may be affected by and may affect others. In the case of medieval trans saints, particularly those who embody the imago transvesti, one may see how living out the authentic truth of imago Dei in the community may inspire others to imitate their choices, bringing forth their own submerged truths. This willingness to live out a God-given truth, one’s imago Dei, and suffer the punishments of a misunderstanding or prejudiced world becomes a way in which trans saints enact imitatio Christi, or imitation of Christ. As various saints live out the imitatio Christi in different ways, it is worth acknowledging that trans saints have specific habits – such as the living out

---

83 Hirschfeld, Transvestites, p. 214; Die Transvestiten, p. 274.
84 Hirschfeld, Transvestites, p. 415; Die Transvestiten, p. 549.
85 Hirschfeld, Die Transvestiten, p. 549; Transvestites, p. 415.
of denied authentic truths – that others (transgender and cisgender alike) may imitate or feel the impact of as *imitatio transvesti*, or trans ‘soul-impact’.

**Imago Transvesti: Images of the trans soul**

The *imago Dei* of transgender saints

To begin, it must be acknowledged that the concepts of authenticity and the *imago Dei* have been used to undermine trans lives. For many trans, intersex, and non-binary persons, the Book of Genesis is experienced as a weapon wielded by those who insist that divine intention is reflected only in the symmetry of a biologically essentialist gender binary. In the introduction to *Transvestites*, Hirschfeld provides a list of binaries which people consider essential and which he intends to trouble, beginning with ‘God and nature, one and all, body and soul’, and arriving at last at one of the divisions that he believes people hold on to most firmly, ‘the masculine and the feminine’.86 Significantly, all of these dichotomies have a cultural origin, still understood by many as spiritual, in Genesis 1:27: ‘God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him: male and female he created them’.87 This statement of resemblance, the *imago Dei*, confirms – yet also disrupts – the binaries previously established. In light of the preceding litany of divisions in Genesis 1, the *imago Dei* seems to break down the binary between Creator and creation, the One and the many. The man and woman in Genesis 1 and 2 embody the *imago Dei* in distinct ways, while sharing traits which reflect on each other and on God. Could this mean that trans, intersex, and non-binary people also distinctly embody the *imago Dei*? Or is one (male or female, cis or trans) the embodiment of God’s truth (*imago Dei*), and the other the embodiment of the world’s lies (*imago mundi*)?

Into this general spiritual mystery arrive the saints, including trans saints, who are held up in the medieval tradition as images of Christ, set apart from humanity and yet human enough to provide glimpses of something beyond. Embodying the intersections between seemingly fundamental divisions (God and nature, one and all, body and soul, man and woman), trans saints embody social as well as theological mysteries. As Davis argues, medieval trans saints resemble the image of God, and specifically the unique *imago Dei* of Christ, promoting ‘the intertextual presentation of Christ as a mimetic

86 Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, p. 17; *Die Transvestiten*, p. 4
87 All references are to the Douay-Rheims Bible.
model’ for transgender saints. In this respect, Davis has done significant work, along with Valerie R. Hotchkiss, in moving the study of trans saints away from analysis in terms of abstracted semiotic cultural projections, such as studies of the binaries listed above, to initiate focus on their embodiments of Christian materiality. Medieval scholarship has tended to try to solve this mystery by representing trans saints as problems of inauthenticity in the imago mundi. Davis presents two typical approaches to trans saints from the mid-1970s, both of which flatten transgender saints into projections of cisgender fears and desires. The first example, epitomized by John Anson, views stories of trans saints as manifesting both monks’ desires for women’s bodies, and the patriarchal denial of femininity. Anson declares: ‘[t]he transvestite female saint is understood as the literary product of this tension’. A second example comes from Evelyne Patlagean, who argues that the trans monk embodies the opposite, an anti-patriarchal image of a woman with the autonomy of a man.

The issue with reading transitioning primarily as a problem with and for cis authenticity is that this problem and its resolutions usually end up returning focus to the cisnormative binary. In short, such readings risk reducing a trans imago Dei to the fantasy of a cis imago mundi, thereby turning internal trans truths into fictions projected from an external, cisnormative world. This leads to the dangerous conclusion that trans people may not exist beyond the tensions and wish-fulfilment fantasies of cis people. Thus, the high stakes for the imago transvesti of trans saints become evident. On the one hand, trans saints’ genders are framed as artificial fantasies or fictions projected from the outside by a conflicted cisgender imago mundi. On the other, these saints are trans people with a deep-seated imago Dei which projects their gender as an expression of their authentic internal truths.

An early treatise on imago Dei is found in Augustine’s fifth-century De Trinitate (On the Trinity); this text was still in circulation when Marinos’s hagiography was written and read. Augustine argues that creation begins as a seed within each soul. ‘[I]f [life], Augustine writes, ‘is made after the image of God [...] then from the moment when that nature so marvelous and so great began to be, whether this image be so worn out as to be almost

88 Davis, ‘Crossed Texts’, p. 34.
89 See Hotchkiss, Clothes, pp. 1-12.
90 Anson, ‘Female Transvestite’, p. 5.
92 Bychowski, ‘The Transgender Turn’.
none at all, or whether it be obscure and defaced, or bright and beautiful, certainly [life] always is [made in the image of God].93 Often one's imago Dei is hidden, yet as a person grows it is revealed. The process of constructing the self authentically, then, can be a co-creative act of affirming the imago Dei. Initially present only as a seed, this imago Dei is revealed as each person affirms the internal logic of their creation. The imago transvesti, figuring the work of transitioning and transvestitism, is thus co-creative work towards an authentic life. And Hirschfeld's concept of the ‘unconscious projection of the soul’ becomes revelatory in framing trans saints as marking the living out of authentic truths, trans imago Dei, over and against the artifice of the world, the cisnormative imago mundi. It would seem that hagiographies are not advocating strictly cisgender lives, which would have been inauthentic for trans saints.

The trans imago Dei of St Marinos the Monk

Turning to the example of St Marinos, one sees how the imago transvesti functions as a medieval prefiguration of Hirschfeld’s transvestite ‘unconscious projection of the soul’. This is particularly evident in a key passage in the vita antiqua, the moment of transition that accompanies the saint’s entrance into the monastery. After Marinos’s father announces that he will leave his child to join the monastery, Marinos reveals his own desires to become a monk. The father resists his child’s request but Marinos persists in arguing his case. Drawing on a theology of mimesis wherein Christians are to imitate Christ as Saviour and also God as Creator, Marinos instructs his father: “The one who saves the soul is like the one who created it.”94 This statement forms part of Marinos’s argument to persuade his father to help him transition, and may function as the thesis for Marinos’s vita, framing the imago mundi, culturally assigned gender, as a threat to the soul (and imago Dei) of trans persons.

What is the nature of this threat? While operating without terminology such as gender dysphoria, Marinos’s vita evidences a dysphoric condition caused by the imago mundi that permits certain cis persons to live authentically in imago Dei, but denies this expression to trans persons. Even

before transition makes his identification as a monk visible, the impulse to reject the *imago mundi* and express the invisible *imago Dei* is evident in Marinos’s strivings to become a monk, and his persuasive understanding of Christian *imago Dei* and *imitatio Christi*. Julia Serano calls this strong but often suppressed identification with a gender, even one as specific as monkhood, ‘subconscious sex’. 95 Alternatively, the fifth edition of the DSM (DSM-5) calls the rejection of assigned gender for another expressed or identified gender, ‘gender dysphoria’. 96 In his analysis of a case study for *Transvestites*, that of the author of a book on forced feminization, Hirschfeld uses the term ‘Seelenregungen’ to describe the trans impulses that the author seems to share with characters of the book. 97 Whilst Lombardi-Nash simply translates ‘Seelenregungen’ as ‘soul’, it might also be translated as ‘soul-movement’ or ‘soul-stirring’, perhaps even ‘soul-striving’. 98 Without psychological or DSM-5 language at his disposal, Marinos too speaks of the soul. Thus, Hirschfeld’s trans-soul language may again be useful in linking or connecting the concepts of medieval essentialism with the dysphoric modern psyche. The rejection of assigned gender roles that cause dysphoria prompts the projection of the soul’s desire to transition.

This soul-striving seems to arise in Marinos when his father leaves to become a monk. Marinos begins to express the strong desire to transition, and the strong rejection of his socially assigned gender. “Father,” says Marinos, ‘do you wish to save your own soul and see mine destroyed?’ 99 The phrase ‘save your own soul’ marks Eugenius as a participant in his own salvation. He is eschewing worldly gender for a new gender, crossing not only a gender binary of man and monk but also a religious binary of secular and sacred life. 100 Marinos likewise wants to eschew the gender the world assigned for a more sanctified gender. This complicates the claim: ‘The one who saves the soul is like the one who created it.’ It is the father who is initially responsible for Marinos’s birth into the world, yet he is also complacent enough to let his child inherit the *imago mundi* he now rejects. Thus, it is Marinos who fights to save his own soul, to transition and become a monk. The soul in this case is the seed of the *imago transvesti*, the monk which Marinos will become, which at this point may be said to already

95 Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 78.
97 Hirschfeld analyses a novel by Fraumann ("Weiberleute").
98 Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, p. 137; *Die Transvestiten*, p. 175.
100 On monkhood and holy orders as distinct gender identities in the Middle Ages, see Newman, ‘Crucified by the Virtues’; and More, ‘Convergence’.
exist in a subconscious (or semiconscious), undeveloped form. If transition is denied, then the seed of Marinos the Monk will not fully come to be. Stuck as ‘Mary’, this trans soul will atrophy, or worse, be destroyed utterly or killed (‘ἀπολέσαι’) by the dysphoria of the imago mundi. By fighting to live an authentic trans life, the doing of the trans saint saves his soul and thus resembles God who created the authentic self into being (‘κτίσας’: to create, lay foundations, establish).

Marinos’s transition allows him to begin to live his authentic life, yet the process of making the invisible subconscious sex visible must overcome the conflict between how society assigns sex according to the imago mundi, and the gender embedded in the ‘unconscious projection of the soul’. The imago mundi fixates to a great degree on sex, reflected in the father’s warning: “it is through the members of your sex that the devil wages war on the servants of God”.\textsuperscript{101} The sexual potential of Marinos (e.g. his genitals) becomes a location of signification that generates conflict between Marinos’s soul-striving, his body, and his socially assigned sex, causing dysphoria. Yet without women’s clothes, Marinos’s genitals and reproductive ability would no longer be advertised on the market of visible gender. The change to men’s clothes, and then the monk’s habit, would reorient how society reads his body, removing the focus on his genitals, since he is supposed to be celibate and effectively non-reproductive.\textsuperscript{102} The image of celibacy that is written in Marinos’s soul-striving is now authentically projected and revealed, eschewing the markers of female reproduction that prompted his dysphoria. The changes reveal the trans soul – the image of Marinos the Monk which had its seed in the youth before his transition began – which remains fundamentally the same, but is now free to authentically express itself.

Evidence that Marinos’s transition allows an authentic living-out of his soul’s striving is provided by his success as a monk. The vita emphasizes how close Marinos already was to embodying a form of manhood. ‘After she lived thus for a few years in the monastery’, records the text, ‘[they] considered her to be a eunuch, for she was beardless and of delicate voice.’\textsuperscript{103} Beyond physical similarities between eunuchs, trans men, and female virgins in medieval literature, monks and eunuchs are not masculinities into which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{102} For more on the role of clothing in defining medieval gender, see Crane, \textit{Performance}. On early modern gender and clothing, see: Dekker and van de Pol, \textit{Tradition}.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Constas, ‘Life’, p. 8; ‘Ποιήσασα δὲ τινας χρόνους ἐν τῷ μοναστηρίῳ, έννομιζον ὃτι εὐνούχος ἐστίν, διὰ τὸ ἄγενειον καὶ τὸ λεπτὸν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτῆς’, Richard, ‘Vie Ancienne’, p. 88.
\end{itemize}
one is generally born.\textsuperscript{104} A trans monk knows, perhaps more than most, that one is not born a monk but becomes a monk. Indeed, many of Marinos's brothers compare his virtues to those of a eunuch.\textsuperscript{105} This underlines an association between being a eunuch and being an exceptional monk.\textsuperscript{106} One can see that Marinos succeeds because he is able to live his authentic life. Marinos the Monk is not a mere construction of external signifiers (hair, clothes, name), but the projection of an image that already existed within Marinos before his transition began, that image which medieval theologians might have called the \textit{imago Dei} and which Hirschfeld calls the trans soul.

\textit{Imitatio Transvesti: Impacts of the trans soul}

The \textit{imitatio Christi} of transgender saints

Medieval scholarship displays a tension between the insistence that hagiography functions to inspire \textit{imitatio Christi}, and the insistence (perhaps more modern than medieval) that trans-ness is a negligible or negative trait for holiness to overcome. One factor in the inability to see authentic transvestitism as more than social artifice may be that a trans life would be artificial for cisgender people, the assumed writers and audiences of both medieval literature and medieval studies. Yet others challenge the assumption that cis folx cannot learn from the specifically trans parts of trans saints's lives. As Hotchkiss asks: ‘If disruptions of gender hierarchy were not encouraged, why then do so many hagiographers write about women disguised as men?’\textsuperscript{107} For those discounting \textit{imago transvesti}, the positive impact that these saints have poses a problem. If, as Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey argue, ‘all early Christian hagiography [...] was motivated by an ethic of imitation,’ one might wonder, as does Davis: ‘Were ancient readers called to seek out the example of Christ in the lives of transvestite saints?’\textsuperscript{108} The answer, strange as it may seem, is that the authenticity of trans saints can have a positive impact on the souls of others, whether trans or cis.

\textsuperscript{104} See Bychowski, ‘Reconstructing the Pardoner’.
\textsuperscript{106} On eunuchs and sanctity, see Szabo in this volume: pp. 109-29.
\textsuperscript{107} Hotchkiss, \textit{Clothes}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{108} Brock and Harvey, \textit{Holy Women}, p. 17; Davis, ‘Crossed Texts’, p. 32.
The trans imitatio Christi of St Marinos the Monk

In the last part of the *Life* of St Marinos, one sees how the impact of his truth occurs after his death, when others are inspired by the *imitatio transvesti* to live more authentic lives. The inclusion of these reconciliations, truth-tellings, and exorcisms is not accidental, but key to the hagiographic function of inspiring imitation of these saints as part of *imitatio Christi*. Just as the story of Jesus continues after his death through the ongoing actions of the Church, so too the imitation of the saint through shared impact is not separate from the saint’s *Life* but part of its ongoing spirit. Thus, one can learn something of a saint by considering the impact and the imitation they inspire. In the case of St Marinos, I argue that the series of persons who eschew falsity and/or inauthentic lives due to the impact of the trans saint signifies his *imitatio transvesti* as the living out of an authentic life, rather than – as has been supposed in much scholarship – through the enactment of artifice. For a time, Marinos is forced to leave the monastery because of accusations begun by an innkeeper’s daughter, spread by the innkeeper, and believed by the monastery’s Superior. Despite these accusations of breaking his vows of chastity by impregnating the innkeeper’s daughter, and despite losing his place within the monastery, Marinos remains faithful to his expression of identity as a chaste man and monk, remaining close to the monastery even during his expulsion. When Marinos’s genitalia and inabilty to impregnate the woman are revealed after his death, the truth of his authenticity and the falsehood of the accusations against him inspire change and transformation in his community.

The first incitement to authenticity after the saint’s death comes from the Superior. Upon learning the truth about Marinos’s body and his suffering, he asks: “‘In what state did his wretched soul depart?’”109 The Superior then realizes the unblemished state of the saint’s soul, and that he himself had enacted falsehood by punishing Marinos for another’s crime. The Superior falls before the body and cries: “Forgive me, for I have sinned against you. I shall lie dead here at your holy feet until such time as I hear forgiveness for all the wrongs that I have done you.”110 Now more accurately perceiving the state of Marinos’s soul, the Superior can glean the soul-striving that Marinos experienced in life because of the dysphoria and untruth that the leader himself had helped to inspire. The result is that the ‘soul-impact’ of Marinos’s

---

life and death will be replicated within himself, the Superior claims, until he can be reconciled to live a life that affirms truth and authenticity.

The sharing of pain encourages the Superior to reconcile with the trans monk by becoming an advocate for his truth after death. "You must repent, brother", the Superior tells the innkeeper. Untruths can inspire others to imitate the habits of untruth, and thus the Superior blames the innkeeper for having 'incited' him to sin, 'by [his] words'. The Superior and the innkeeper did not invent the untruths of the *imago mundi*, but both participated in them and inspired others to unwittingly imitate them. The revelation of Marinos’s lived truth now acts as a baptism or transition for others, by which deception can die. Others can participate in the pain and death of the saint, allowing them to be reborn into more authentic truths and selves.

By the 'soul-impact' of *imitatio transvesti*, the Superior and the innkeeper realize that not only did they not see the truth of Marinos's *imago Dei*, but their perspectives were clouded by *imago mundi*. Marinos tried to share his authentic life but the Superior could not receive it; his worldview excluded trans souls. Thus when Marinos confesses: “Forgive me, father, for I have sinned as a man”, the Superior hears him say that 'as a man' he sinned (‘ἐπλανήθην': caused to wander, led astray) by impregnating the woman, while Marinos means that he has sinned (been caused to wander) by not being authentic in the way in which he exists 'as a man'. The specific word, ‘ἐπλανήθην’ which is usually translated as ‘sin’ also signifies the impact and experiences of being made to wander away from his fully recognized authentic self as a trans man, and specifically a trans monk. Yet because of worldly exclusion and incomprehension of trans-ness, he would either be rejected (thus caused to wander) from the monastery for impregnating the woman, or else would have been rejected (caused to wander) from the monastery for not being able to impregnate her. This double bind may be seen as the effect of sinful *imaginæ mundi* that prompt untruths. The sin that Marinos confesses may not be that he lived as a man, but that he did not and could not live authentically as a *trans man*. Marinos was denied the power to be seen as a trans saint until after death when his community was ready to repent, to see him and their own mistakes.

114 Hotchkiss, *Clothes*, p. 16.
Beyond worldly prejudices, perhaps the greatest ‘soul-impact’ of Marinos comes in the form of healing and liberation of the soul. Shortly after Marinos’s father dies, the saint receives from God ‘the gift of healing those who were troubled by demons’.\(^\text{115}\) The touch of the trans saint heals the possessed and further emphasizes how *imitatio transvesti* empowers the possessed to live more authentically according to their *imago Dei*. After contact with Marinos’s hands, people were able to be reborn into their authentic lives. For many, trans embodiment is a liberation from the demons of living falsely in a gender misassigned at birth. Indeed, it is only after living an authentic life as a man that Marinos finds himself able to empower others to return to their authentic selves. After ‘confessing the truth’, that the saint did not (indeed, could not) impregnate her, and being brought to stand before the maligned body of the trans monk, the innkeeper’s daughter ‘was immediately healed’ of her demonic possession.\(^\text{116}\) Being brought to witness the ‘unconscious projection of the soul’ embodied by the trans saint empowers the woman to dispel the constructed artifice she herself has devised, and instead to live an authentic truth. In the end, even if Marinos did not live to see it, the authentic life of the trans saint is affirmed by the authentic presenting of self he inspires in others.

**Conclusion: The authenticity of trans lives**

In arguing for the consideration of transgender saints through the frame of authenticity, my goal has been to offer an alternative to trends in scholarship that reduce trans life to the traps and trappings of cultural fears and desires projected onto transgender bodies. In short, I am tired of transgender life merely being understood negatively, by how we disturb other people’s theories and histories. In its place, I seek to root medieval trans studies in positive claims. As I tell my students, do not let yourself become someone else’s worst version of you. Authenticity is one way we tell our own stories and tell our own histories.

Authenticity has been one part of the theoretical thesis of transgender lives for years. In *Whipping Girl* (2007), Serano articulates that the unconscious yearning to express oneself through transitioning is critical to understanding


her story, and the stories of many others.\textsuperscript{117} A decade prior, in the seminal text for transgender studies, ‘The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’, Sandy Stone argues that trans people need to refuse the call to ‘pass’, and rather live authentically as their varied trans selves.\textsuperscript{118} Even further back, in \textit{Transvestites}, Hirschfeld calls on psychologists to allow trans people to live authentically according to their unconscious soul. And Hirschfeld in turn roots his theory in the medieval \textit{Life} of St Marinos, which views authentic transvestitism as saving the God-given transgender soul. This is what I mean when I say that trans studies has been, from its beginning, interested in the authenticity of medieval transgender saints.

Today, beyond academic discourses of trans and medieval studies, being able to reclaim trans lives as authentic from the imagined traps invoked by cisgender cultural desires and anxieties is a matter of life and death. With civil rights protections requiring transgender to be categorized as a discrete insular community with immutable traits, both law and medicine hold authentic truths as necessary prerequisites to determining judgments, rights, coverage, and care. And the trans community has also seen the impact of the authenticity of transgender being denied. In the USA and elsewhere, trans students have been denied access to bathrooms on the grounds that they might be sexual predators disguising themselves to assault victims while they pee. At the same time, US states set diverse and often difficult-to-meet standards for determining the authenticity of trans adults’ claims when they move to change gender markers on government-issued identity documents. In public discourse, the slur ‘trap’ has seen a spike, including online through hashtags (#trap), used to mark trans people (especially trans women and trans feminine people) as sexual predators disguising themselves in order to fool or ‘trap’ cis people into sexual encounters.\textsuperscript{119} By defining trans people as inauthentic ‘traps’, transphobes also excuse ‘trans panic’ wherein their anger, abuse, and even deadly violence against trans people are presented as a ‘natural’ defensive response to someone trying to fool and trap them; this legal defence is still considered valid today, only banned within a small minority of courts in the United States.\textsuperscript{120} Whether or not one regards transgender as essential or rooted in the subconscious soul, one should not undervalue the life-saving power that narratives of trans authenticity offer.

\textsuperscript{117} Serano, \textit{Whipping Girl}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{118} Stone, ‘Empire Strikes Back’, pp. 221-35.
\textsuperscript{119} See also ‘Trap’ in the Appendix, p. 323.
\textsuperscript{120} Woods, Sears and Mallory, ‘Defense’.
In the end, this chapter is an expression of my own exhaustion with the insistence that trans lives are signifiers of artifice, fantasies, false lifestyles, and socio-sexual traps. Yet this chapter also has broader goals: to reclaim the authenticity of transvestitism and trans saints. There is more to the internal life of trans people than an amalgam of the fears and desires projected onto them. The authenticity of transgender saints was then and is now an important element and impact to consider, both for the ongoing work of current trans politics, and for medieval trans history. Authenticity is one way we escape the traps we have been made to embody for far too long.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Fraumann, Luz, "Weiberleute": Ein merkwürdiger Roman (Budapest: M.W. Schneider, 1906).

Secondary sources


**About the author**

M.W. BYCHOWSKI is the Anisfield-Wolf SAGES Fellow at Case Western Reserve University (USA) and a scholar with peer-reviewed articles on transgender, disability, and critical race studies in *TSQ, postmedieval, Medieval Feminist Forum, The Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, and *A Cultural History of Race in the Renaissance and Early Modern Age*, as well as a co-editor of *Medieval Trans Feminisms* (2019). She is a well-known, much respected blogger on equity pedagogy, disability, and trans studies (http://www.thingstransform.com). She received her Doctorate from the George Washington University in English Literature. She is currently developing book projects on trans literary theory and medieval transgender history.