Epilogue

Beyond Binaries: A Reflection on the (Trans) Gender(s) of Saints

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Abstract

In this epilogue, I discuss the productivity of trans and genderqueer readings of medieval hagiography in three contexts: the development of hagiographical studies since the 1960s, of gender studies since Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work *Le deuxième sexe* (1949-1950), and, finally, of historical studies, since the publication of Pierre Nora’s *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992). It should be clear that this afterword is not intended as anything like a final conclusion to this volume, claiming to neatly resolve all of the questions raised. Instead, it is an invitation to further explore gender and saints, to reflect on both categories as well as on methods of trans and genderqueer reading, and, finally, on the societal meaning of such studies today.

Keywords: gender, saints, trans theory, gender studies, topicality of the Middle Ages

In this epilogue, I would like to discuss the productivity of trans and genderqueer readings of medieval hagiography in three contexts: the development of hagiographical studies since the 1960s, of gender studies since Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work *Le deuxième sexe* (1949-1950), and, finally, of historical studies since the publication of Pierre Nora’s multi-volume edited collection, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992). It should be clear that this afterword is not intended as anything like a final conclusion to this volume, claiming to neatly resolve all of the questions raised. Instead, it is an invitation to further explore gender and saints, to reflect on both categories as well as on methods of trans and genderqueer reading, and, finally, on the societal meaning of such studies today.
Scholarly contexts

Hagiographical studies have boomed since the 1960s, when historians of ideas discovered that tales about saints were among the richest sources for cultural change. Ever since the French historian Jacques Le Goff held up hagiography as a source ‘par excellence’, medievalists have shown how saints reflected the ideas, practices and feelings of their contexts and, indeed, how such phenomena changed over time, as well as between geographic and cultural domains.¹

De Beauvoir arguably invented gender, although she does not use the term: the idea that, although biological sex may exist, the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are constructed differently in different cultures. Lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality, drawing a connection between gender and other characteristics such as disability, race, class, age, and sexuality, which prove to be just as constructed as the difference between men and women. Philosopher Judith Butler developed de Beauvoir’s suggestion that gender is not necessarily linked to bodies. For Butler, gender is constructed and reinforced through repeated social performance, leading to the ultimate conclusion that one does not need a specific body to perform femininity or masculinity.² Moreover, she points to the constructed nature of sex itself, as a concept created through language. Therefore, like any word or phrase, its meaning is flexible.³

Thus far, in historical studies, these constructivist approaches have been more influential than the theories of sexual difference advocated by a younger generation of Paris-based philosophers, including Luce Irigaray. Like de Beauvoir, Irigaray did some work on female mystics. Her interest is more in construing these women as models for a new, or as she asserts, renewed, specifically feminine form of subjectivity.⁴ Philosophically inspiring with its aim of liberating women as subjects, Irigaray’s theory is less useful for historical research as she is not searching for what gender or sex may have meant in the Middle Ages, nor is she interested in disrupting binary constructions of gender. The Bulgarian-French Julia Kristeva, who was often criticized for her supposed lack of feminist credentials, may be more helpful here, in terms of her theoretical stance of rejecting fixed categories.⁵

¹ Le Goff, ‘Les mentalités’, p. 86.
² Butler, Gender Trouble.
³ Butler, Bodies That Matter, pp. 5-6.
⁴ Irigaray, Speculum, pp. 238-52.
This volume also connects to the politicized attitude towards the past, and the study of the past, promoted by French historian Nora and his team in the three volumes of *Lieux de mémoire*, in which history is studied as constructed memory. They show how certain sites, events, concepts, objects, and people from the past were appropriated by different groups in France to symbolize, and summarize, their identities. St Joan of Arc is just one example: she can be a left-wing working-class hero, a right-wing nationalist, or whatever else is useful to bolster one’s sense of self. Thus, Nora and his collaborators show the relevance of history for today, as well as its rootedness in our contemporary power structures and present-day concerns, ultimately highlighting history’s dialogic quality.

Later, Dutch historian Willem Frijhoff stressed that appropriation of the past as an identity marker always involves expropriation, by which non-dominant groups are marginalized in the grand narrative of ‘our past’. The current discussion about statues of historical ‘heroes’, catalysed by the global Black Lives Matter movement, is a case in point. For example, General Robert E. Lee was the slave-owning commander of the Confederate States Army in the American Civil War, a war fought by the South for the right to retain chattel slavery and profit from Black suffering. Sculptural homages to Lee in American cities send a clear message about who determines who ‘we’ are, what counts as ‘our’ past or, even more fundamentally, what this past actually was. Aware of the occasionally toxic topicality of the past, Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall use their privilege as editors to identify their collection of essays as ‘a call to arms’, an invitation to conduct historical research with an aim of generating knowledge about the past, and to reconsider one’s role in producing a past that intervenes in the present – as it inevitably does.

All of this is a far cry from the ideology of the past’s radical alterity, an intellectual tradition in which I was raised as a historian, and which, in itself, was a reaction against nationalists’ all-too-easy appropriations of the past for their own ends, with historians as happy collaborators. The consciousness of history’s connection to present-day power structures is a more realist account of what actually happens in historical studies: how present-day interests inspire particular narratives of the past, and

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8 Grovier, ‘Protests’.
9 Marcus, ‘Last Confederate Statue’.
how scholarly assessments are informed by the researchers’ contexts. For instance, before the rise of women’s or gender studies, no medievalist thought of focusing on the societal functions of female visionaries as spiritual leaders, or the political power some of these women could exert, rather than the literary or theological value of their writings, or their psychopathology. These aspects only came to the fore in the context of feminism, and the larger presence of women in the public sphere from the 1960s onwards. The same is true for trans and genderqueer readings as proposed in this volume: such readings only became possible in the context of the current challenges to a binary model of gender, both in biology and in the humanities. Genetic research has revealed that biological sex is more complex than one half of humanity having XX and the other half having XY chromosomes. Instead, there is a variety of combinations: some men have an extra X-chromosome (XXY) or an extra Y (XYY); some women are missing part of the second X-chromosome (known as X, 45), and so on. In this volume, Lee Colwill shows the effect of disregarding transgender, non-binary or non-normative possibilities. Archaeologists automatically assumed that the presence of weapons or a certain kind of jewellery in a grave indicated that the deceased was a cis man, whilst ‘contrary’ signs, such as ‘feminine’ jewellery combined with ‘masculine’ swords, were disregarded. Osteological evidence and DNA research have revealed that, in some cases, buried individuals who were previously assumed to be cis men had XX chromosomes. The question of their social gender remains open.

The chapters in this volume show how dialogical awareness does not necessarily entail a presentist view of the past: rigorous research on sources in their medieval contexts reveals their enduring cultural impact. Several contributors, including Kevin C.A. Elphick, Amy V. Ogden, and M.W. Bychowski, explicitly connect their medievalist research to the current struggles of marginalized people.

A third window

When it comes to saints, their most striking characteristic is that they are different, even the opposite of the people around them. Inspired by the grace of God, they imitate Christ’s perfection and become like Him. This means that they relinquish all human desires, such as lust, or longings for...
wealth or high office, and focus on God instead. This was seen as a return to authenticity, to humankind as it was originally intended to be. Following St Augustine, medieval authors believed that the Fall had caused humanity to lose its likeness to God, at least in part, and to become infected with an almost irrepressible desire for carnality. Saints had risen above this predicament and become quasi-divine, becoming humans as He intended them to be. What, however, did this mean for their gendered performances as described by their hagiographers or rendered in images, especially when their function as models for imitation is taken into account? What did it mean for the way(s) in which their bodies were represented, their stories told?

A passage in a fifteenth-century Middle Dutch Life of St Barbara of Nicomedia may help to explain the very special gender of saints. Barbara's original Latin Life is traditionally ascribed to the Augustinian hermit Johannes of Wackerzele, writing before the end of the fourteenth century. The Life is included in the Compilatio de Sancta Barbara, which contains hagiographical texts in many genres, and which was hugely popular in the late Middle Ages, not only in its original Latin, but also in translations in several vernaculars: alongside the Middle Dutch version under discussion here, there are extant editions in Middle English, Middle High German, and Middle Low German.

According to the Life in the Compilatio, Barbara's father, Dioscorus, was a persecutor of Christians. Wishing to keep his daughter's beauty to himself, he locked her in a tower. A loving father, Dioscorus was careful to have it fitted with two windows, one in the North and one in the South, to ensure that the rising sun would not wake her up too early in the morning, and that she would not lie awake too long due to the evening sun. When construction was well underway, he left on a journey, only to return to an unpleasant surprise:

Much later, her father, King Dyoscrius [sic], returned, and much admired the beautiful building. And when he noted that the tower had been fitted out with three windows, he remembered his orders and asked: 'Who made you build a third window, overriding my orders that there should be only two?' A builder replied: 'Sire, your daughter, my lady, pressed the masters to build it'. Instantly, he had his daughter brought before him. After he had kissed her, he asked whether she had ordered a third window to be constructed. And she replied: 'Yes, father, because three windows

12 As St Augustine knew to his cost; see Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 1, pp. 88-102.
13 For an overview of the impact of this Compilatio, see de Gaiffier, ‘La légende’, pp. 8-12.
enlighten all humankind but two engender darkness. Humankind is born divided into only two sexes, that is, man and woman. Therefore, as far as we are concerned, two windows suffice, but in the threefold number of these windows, father, a greater mystery is hidden. Please be patient and hear me out. These are the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, who are not three gods but one true God, the Creator of all[.]

Dioscorus realizes that his daughter has converted to Christianity, after which a long sequence of torments and discussions between the saint, her father and the local judge begins, punctuated by Dioscorus's fits of rage. Eventually, he executes her himself, and is struck by lightning as a result.

For our purposes, Barbara's message about the three windows is the most important aspect; according to the saint, they symbolize the Trinity. Should we conclude that God has three genders? This would not be in accordance with theological ideas about the nature of God. The main characteristic of God is that He is different from everything in creation. This is also why it is virtually impossible to talk about Him, as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) so famously argued in *De mystica theologia*. His apophatic theology was embraced by scholastics and mystics alike. God was not to be encapsulated in the concepts that humankind could invent. If Barbara represents Him as being threefold, her point is that He is different. The same applied to saints, who were as close to God as any human could hope to be. Like Him, they are beyond gender. As Caitlyn McLoughlin argues in her chapter on Capgrave's rendition of the legend of Katherine of Alexandria, it is Katherine's very non-normativity as a queen who chose scholarship and virginity over marriage and reign that showed her saintliness. Bychowski and Ogden suggest that the same is true for the saints assigned female at

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birth, who lived in monasteries as monks. Their transcendence of gendered categories proved their saintliness.

The thought that variation in gender could happen was reinforced by biological theories. Sex, like everything else in the human body, was determined by the proportion of the humours. This is why Aristotle regarded woman as a failed man: during gestation fire and heat had developed insufficiently, which caused her to be cold and humid. In medieval thought, this had consequences for capacities and morals: women were supposed to be less suited to intellectual labour and more inclined to sin. Medieval natural scientists and theologians acknowledged that the actual division of the humours was different for each individual. Thus, sex was not seen in terms of a stark contrast between men on one side and women on the other. Depending on the balance of heat and cold, individual men or women could be closer or further away from the opposite sex, with the hermaphrodite in the middle of the scale, viewed alternately as a magical or a monstrous being. The humours could be manipulated: an ascetic lifestyle was supposed to increase the proportion of fire and therefore made both men and

Figure E.1  The Lamentation of Christ

Courtesy of the Hôpital Notre Dame à La Rose, Lessen, Belgium

15 See ‘Hermaphrodite’ in the Appendix: p. 300.
women more manly.16 Fire was connected to God; becoming more fiery meant that one had come closer to him.

Elphick’s portrayal of Juana de la Cruz offers a perspective in which theology and biology come to the fore. According to her own testimony, Juana was initially formed in the womb as male, and was reassigned female by God himself, in response to a request from the Virgin Mary. Her sermons stress how Jesus took on characteristics from his mother and his Father alike. Thus, both in her own person and in her work, Juana challenged gender binaries – she developed an apophatic gender theology, in which gender is never fixed. The same is true for characters such as Martha Newman’s Joseph, Bychowski’s Marinos, and Ogden’s Eufrosine. The fluidity of gender allows people assigned female at birth to live as monks, their gender unquestioned until their bodies are laid out for burial. Here, it is important to acknowledge the internal logic of these narratives, in which it is significant to show that the supposed brother was ‘actually’ a sister, thus undermining and enhancing the flexibility of gender simultaneously. The fact that these holy individuals could live not only as men (rising above their ‘real’, i.e. assigned, female sex and gender), but also as exemplary monks (rising above the commonplace of their identified male gender), is intended to put the less perfect, ordinary men, who read or heard their vitae to shame. Female audiences might be alerted to what spiritual perfection could bring. Felix Szabo’s chapter on the eunuch Ignatios shows how his ascesis allows him to rise above his limitations. As a castrated man, he had no part in normative masculinity. It was commonly believed that the removal of their sexual parts caused eunuchs to become less manly and therefore more like females. As a result, they were presumed to become licentious as far as sex, luxury and food were concerned. Rejecting all of this, Ignatios was able to become perfect.

Vanessa Wright’s chapter on the illuminations in three fourteenth-century manuscripts of the legend of Eufrosine shows artists’ struggles to depict such non-normative genders, as does Szabo’s chapter. According to the narrative, Eufrosine’s fellow monks did not read the new arrival as female (the sex that Eufrosine was assigned at birth), or as normatively male, instead identifying this brother as a eunuch; however, showing this in an image is a challenge. Spectators must be able to recognize Eufrosine’s difference by visible markers, if only to identify the protagonist. Thus, the illuminator plays with gendered performances such as wearing longer or shorter hair, or feminine-coded robes. The same is true of a mosaic depicting Ignatios, who, in the company of customarily bearded patriarchs, is shown without a beard.

16 See: Murray, ‘One Flesh’; Cadden, Meanings.
Saints are special, not the least because they are capable of transgressing seemingly fixed gender categories, as is their model, Christ, who was God and human at the same time. As God, He would be beyond gender, but as Caroline Walker Bynum and other researchers have argued, the same is true as far as His body is concerned. Flexible, suffering and emitting liquids such as blood, it was similar to a woman's body, despite Christ's traditional assignment as a man. In her seminal monograph *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum stressed the motherly capacity of His body to provide food, thus enhancing the connection to women, who can also provide food through their bodies. A spectacular sixteenth-century image, the *Lamentation of Christ* (Fig. E.1), forcefully depicts his multiple genders, his motherliness and his agonies all at once. From a hospital in Lessen led by Augustinian canonesses, it connects the latter to the patients' own suffering, presumably offering them comfort.

Sophie Sexon's analyses in the present collection strengthen Bynum's arguments considerably. Not only do Christ's wounds, specifically the side wound, appear similar to female genitals, but these and other images were also used to help in women's ordeals such as childbirth or menstruation. The birthing girdles that were laid across the bodies of women in labour are Sexon's most striking example: the suffering of Christ and the suffering of women were connected. They also examine the haptic practices around manuscripts, in which readers would touch and kiss texts and miniatures. Direct contact with the wound would draw the readers closer to Christ, even into him, thus dissolving the boundaries between him and the believer, who would come to share his gender fluidity, as did the saints.

It is a matter for debate whether such capacity – and preference – for gender fluidity applies to saints alone. Gutt's study of gender in the romance of *Tristan de Nanteuil*, along with Colwill's sepulchral case studies, indicates that fluidity could apply to anyone, not only canonized Christian saints. Gutt's study expands the discussion into a study of disability and the healing power of saints. Colwill discusses several graves which belonged to practitioners of seiðr, a form of magic which is thought to have involved ritual disruptions of normative gender practices. Indeterminate social gender belongs to these practitioners, but the same can be true for other individuals. Apparently, there was a difference between social and biological gender, as Colwill convincingly shows.

17 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, pp. 181-238.
18 It became widely known after being included in a Brussels exhibition on female mysticism; for the catalogue, see Vandenbroeck, *Hooglied*, p. 61, cat. 19.
The final words in this section are about love. In the lives of saints, there is often a contrast between the natural love of parents for their children, and the love of God and humankind that a saint practises. As Ogden describes, parental or familial love is the wrong kind, keeping the saint entrenched in worldly pursuits such as marriage. St Barbara’s father is even worse than Eufrosine’s, as he uncharitably strives to hide a beautiful part of creation from his fellow human beings, rather than sharing it. His rages and eventual execution of his daughter show that his love lacks measure. Saints offer an alternative by the measured love of their charity, which aims to lead their fellow human beings towards God rather than to carnal pleasures, as Eufrosine did for her father. Moreover, whilst earthly parents may not always be able to accept trans saints on their own terms, God’s love embraces trans saints entirely, not in spite of their transness but perhaps because of it.

In dialogue

Living and working in a European city’s downtown, passing two medieval churches every day, walking the town’s medieval street plan, it is hard to imagine the Middle Ages as being irrelevant. Recently, it has become even more topical. TV series and games set in medieval contexts, such as Game of Thrones and Assassin’s Creed, have become big hits. Moreover, white supremacists refer to the Middle Ages as they seek historical support for their Islamophobia, fantasizing as they do about an ethnically unified Europe, where men were men and women knew their places. The essays in this volume challenge such notions.

This volume shows the fluidity of gender in saints’ – and others’ – lives, how gender norms could be, and were, manipulated in the Middle Ages, and how identified gender is not necessarily synonymous with sex/gender assigned at birth. In addition, it shows the co-existence of several formats for leading one’s life, technically in contrast with each other, in practice intermingled. Finally, this volume bears witness to the presence of trans and non-binary people in the Middle Ages. Joan of Arc’s cross-dressing might be a matter of expedience, but it might also be that she just felt more like her (or him)self when wearing men’s clothes and engaging in the masculine practice of war. Beyond the Middle Ages,
history offers several well-documented examples of trans identity, such as the Chevalier d’Éon (1728-1810). Recent genetic research has revealed that the differences between the sexes are structured as a continuum, rather than there being a stark contrast between male and female. The concept of a continuum is also present in medieval perceptions of the differences between the sexes, albeit on very different grounds. In any case, it seems that binaries do not work: we need messiness rather than fixed categories.

From a medieval perspective, this messiness may seem less radical than it does to us. It was understood that gender, like any other category which could be applied to Creation, could not be used to define God except symbolically. Moreover, as far as human beings were concerned, it was clear that sex operated on a scale and, by manipulation, could slide either way. Therefore, describing God as a mother, or a virgin saint as a man, would not be as shocking as it may seem to some of us.

Troubling supposedly fixed categories such as male and female will challenge the usual ways of assessing gender and sex. Frappez toujours: eventually, this may have an effect. Only decades ago, it was a radical thought that women had very important roles in the budding movement around Christ; today this is commonplace. Only recently, women as a species were considered unfit to rule: today Christine Lagarde (Head of the European Central Bank) and Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor (Bundeskanzlerin) are just two examples to the contrary. Vigilance remains necessary, as this is no shining narrative of glorious progress: whereas in many countries gay and trans rights have become a matter of course, others return to persecution of non-heterosexual and non-cis individuals.

At the very least, tales of saints’ gender fluidity show that medieval authors were as fascinated by the difference between sexes – and between genders – as we are. Their conclusion was to view the saints as being close to God, who was also beyond gender, and, as far as creatures were concerned, to regard gender as unstable in any individual, dependent as it was on the proportion of the humours. Trans and genderqueer readings of the sources offer an extra lens for understanding gender in the Middle Ages, and possibly in our day too. New understanding of our contemporary moment is generated in dialogue with the paradigm offered by medieval sources: a fundamental openness to instability, to gender beyond binaries.

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20 Rose, ‘Trans in Translation’.

21 Cf. Kristeva, Speculum; see also Schippers, Julia Kristeva, pp. 21-53.
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