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McGowen, Richard J. Investigation of what range of scientific theories of generation were available to Thomas Aquinas and which models of sexual reproduction he actually knew.

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GAY AND LESBIAN CONCERNS

†

(This discussion continues from no. 13 of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter,* where it began)

**MALE/FEMALE/BOTH/NEITHER:**

GENDER AS FLOATING SIGNIFIER IN THE LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL FRANCE

‡

Gender has recently been at the forefront of philosophical and literary scholarship, propelled by such studies as Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*¹ and Judith Butler's provocative *Gender Trouble.*² Both these studies are indebted to the anthropologist Margaret Mead, whose 1949 book *Male and Female* pointed out that the notion of sex
membership, while fundamental to the human sense of identity, is also deeply problematic. The unease Mead finds is echoed and developed in the way Foucault sees sexuality, and Butler gender, as social constructions which hide their own artificiality and thus cover up their radically subjective and culturally-bound nature.

Though these ways of thinking about gender may seem quite modern, in fact they are foreshadowed by many of the texts that form the domain of the medievalist. In this brief article I will examine the ways in which a variety of literary works (composed primarily in thirteenth-century France) break sex and gender, often quite unexpectedly, into a variety of free-floating parts that cause us to rethink those concepts as radically as do philosophical texts written centuries later.

The first work is one of the most canonical in the Old French corpus as it is currently constituted, and was also the most popular secular literary work of the French Middle Ages: *The Romance of the Rose*. The romance is usually read as a heterosexual love story, a dream vision about a young man who falls in love with a maiden who is represented as a rose in a garden. The dreamer pursues her through a series of debates with allegorical characters who represent aspects of the maiden's personality, and he eventually attains sexual union with the object of his desire. But the text also makes itself available to readings less governed by heterosexual patterns. For example, in Guillaume de Lorris' section of the text, the Rose is nowhere explicitly identified as a woman, as Armand Strubel has pointed out; and as Martha Powell Harley has noted, the Rose itself is at times depicted not as a female corolla but virtually as phallus-straight, stiff, and full of seed.

The gender structure of the poem's love affair is further challenged by the very machinery out of which the romance is constructed. As an allegory, the *Romance of the Rose* attributes human form — and, hence human gender — to abstract qualities: thus Reason (Reson, in French) is female, Fair Welcome (Bel Acueil) male, etc. Though standard in allegory, this practice has odd consequences here. Since Reason is female, she must therefore be garrulous and seductive, as women in Old French literature tend to be — characteristics that are in direct conflict with Reason's logical name and character as well as her celestial lineage. Even odder is the fact that since Fair Welcome and other allegorical figures are masculine, their relationship with the dreamer is to some degree implicitly homosexual. And another character, False Seeming (Faus Semblant), discourses at length on his ability to play the roles of both men and women. For him, gender, like all other aspects of human identity is simply an illusion that can be created or dispelled whenever the gesture is expedient. One further part of the romance in which the anomalies of gender become an issue is the story of Narcissus, told first by Guillaume de Lorris and then re-told by Pygmalion in Jean de Meun's section. Pygmalion tries to make Narcissus fit into the heterosexual mold; but since the boy is in love with the image of himself, this attempt at normalization creates even more gender confusion. This episode shows once again that the *Romance of the Rose* is incapable of conforming with a "straight" view of the world: any effort to smooth out such wrinkles in one part of the carpet of gender only creates bumps in another part.

Other Old French texts also slice gender in ways that differ from modern expectations. One pertinent issue is cross-dressing. In contemporary Western society, people often cross-dress in an attempt to bring their appearance into conformity with
what they believe to be their true and natural sexual identity, and often provoke much
social disapproval by such behavior. In medieval literature, on the other hand, people
cross-dress for other reasons, and their transvestism is often presented in such a way as to
invoke the reader's approbation. Female characters in medieval texts typically don male
garb in order to escape the perils and limitations of the status to which their sex
condemns them, as in the legends of transvestite female saints. Male characters, on the
other hand, generally cross-dress to gain freer sexual access to women than social rules
would allow. One text in which both kinds of cross-dressing are present is the thirteenth-
century *Roman de Silence* of Heldris de Cornuâlle, in which a girl is brought up as a
boy and given the coded name "Silence." By adopting a gender not indicated by her sex,
Silence is able to avoid certain social problems during her childhood. The other side of
the picture is shown by another figure in the romance — a guard, who by dressing as a
nun, is able to have a covert sexual relationship with the queen. As Roberta Krueger
notes, however, gender norms are reasserted with a vengeance at the end of the
romance: the guard and the queen are executed for their transgression, and Silence is
then able to resume her "natural" gender and, with it, social approbation in the form of
her rightful inheritance and marriage with the king.

A more playful approach towards transvestism is found in the fabliaux. One
element is the little-studied *Trubert* by Douin de Lavesne. In his campaign of tricks
against the Duke of Burgundy, Trubert wears a series of disguises: he is first a carpenter,
then a doctor, then a knight. Finally, he surpasses himself by claiming to be his own
sister, in whose persona he not only seduces the daughter of the duke, but also becomes
the bride of the daughter's former fiancé. Trubert's real and artificial genital organs seem
to meet the needs of every circumstance, and he carries off all his deceptions to the
satisfaction of every character — except, of course, the duped seigneur. Many of the
shorter fabliaux focus even more directly than *Trubert* on the sex organs themselves,
which call into question what we typically and traditionally see as the determining fact of
gender. In these stories, genitals have an independent existence: penises, vaginas, and
anuses carry on conversations, become detached from bodies, wander around by
themselves, and even find new owners. Thus we have the coyly titled "Debate of the A.
and the C.," in which asshole and cunt accuse one another of being bad neighbors; "The
Ring Which Made ... Big and Stiff," in which impossibly large erections are caused,
independent of any sexual desire, by a magical ring; "The Mouse in the Flax," in which a
stupid peasant chases after a mouse his reluctant bride claims is her errant vagina; "Of the
Three Ladies Who Found a Dick," "The Knight Who Made Cunts Talk," and even "The
Castrated Woman."

Even from these few examples, one can see that in a wide range of medieval genres,
genre is not the fixed quantity we might have expected it to be. The artifices of
language, of clothing, and of sex itself reveal that gender is fragmented, conditional,
slippery, and impermanent. If a woman can own penises and men can make vaginas talk,
then these genital organs are not just body parts, but independent entities which can
behave in unpredictable and improbable ways. These medieval texts present sex and
genre not as a stable system of relations between individuals, but as a play of almost
arbitrary forces which are at least as modern as we are.

What, one may ask, are all the anomalies of gender doing in these medieval texts?
Are they there deliberately or accidentally? How were they perceived by medieval authors and audiences? And what do they mean for us? In good part, I believe, freedom with sex and gender is one of many ways in which medieval literature presented itself as play, an area in which medieval authors and audiences could escape from the circumspection of social practice.17 For modern readers, the texts can serve similar functions. But they can also serve, as more recent works of gender theory do, to challenge our thinking. When we start deconstructing gender in literary texts, we begin to be able to explore the ramifications not only of artistic representations of sex and gender, but also — by treating them as cultural texts — social manifestations of the same forces, whether these be sexual behaviors, institutions such as marriage and the family, or ideological constructions such as masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, or homosexuality. What we discover is likely to be different from what modernists have found, but it will be no less enriching both to medieval studies and to the study of sex and gender as a whole.18

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6Martha Powell Harley, "Narcissus, Hermaphroditus and Attis: Ovidian Lovers at the Fontaine d'Amors in Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose*" (*PMLA* 101 [1986]: 334: "La tige ere droite conjons! et par desus siet il boutons/ si qu'i cline ne ne pent" (1663-5) (The stem was straight as a reed, and on top of it sat the bud, and it neither leans nor bends [my translation]); cf. also, on the Rose's seed, 3347-52.


8See 11159-82 (Lecoy ed.).


10Note that we are discussing medieval literature, not medieval practice: Joan of Arc, for example, was executed, in the end, not for heresy but for refusing to give up wearing masculine clothing: see Vern L. Bullough, "Transvestism in the Middle Ages," in Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, *Sexual Practices & the Medieval Church* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1982), 51-2.

11See Bullough, "Transvestism," 43-54.


An Art Historical Response to "Gay Studies and Feminism: A Medievalist's Perspective"

I. Survey of the Literature

Art history, traditionally more conservative than other humanities disciplines, is only at the beginning stages of gay studies, and, as with feminist research, the focus has been primarily on modern art. Yet a few authors have examined art in the context of medieval homosexuality. In 1976, Ilene Forsyth devoted an article to an early twelfth-century...