

WORK IN PROGRESS



Allen, Prudence, R.S.N. *The Concept of Woman: 1250 - 1800*. Forthcoming, Univ. of Scranton Press, 1993 - 94? Of special interest may be Chapter 5, on women religious writers as a bridge to the new concept of woman. It shows the progressive philosophical development of women religious writers on the subjects of wisdom and virtue. Demonstrates that their use of discursive reasoning to defend active self-knowledge, self-governance, and public action serves as a direct counter-example to the Aristotelian theory of woman's proper identity.

_____. "Lucrezia Marinelli and Woman's Identity in the Late Italian Renaissance." With Filippo Salvatore, forthcoming in *Renaissance and Reformation*.

Gibson, Joan. Paper, "Errant women and commonplace sexism in Renaissance logic." Outlines three forms of increasingly explicit sexism which arise in Renaissance attacks on scholastic logic.

_____. Paper on the history of the history of medieval philosophy and how it frames the investigation of women *in* philosophy and *as* philosophers, as well as *female imagery* in philosophy.

_____. Book-length ms. on the medieval and Renaissance use of the image of inner mental activity as a mental word which is conceived analogously to the processes of human reproduction. Tentatively titled: *Bearing in Mind: A History of Mental Conception*.

Gössman, Elisabeth. Monograph on Hildegard of Bingen to be published by Peregrina Press, Toronto. No date.

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.

Joan Gibson, York University

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 MIEVEAL 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.³ 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,⁴ the Rose is nowhere explicitly identified as a woman, as Armand Strubel has pointed out;⁵ 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.⁶

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 Accueil) 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.⁷ And another character, False Seeming (Faus Semblant), discourses at length on his ability to play the rôles of both men and women:⁸ 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;⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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,¹¹ as in the legends of transvestite female saints.¹² 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 Cornuälle,¹³ 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:¹⁴ 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 example is the little-studied *Trubert* by Douin de Lavesne.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

Even from these few examples, one can see that in a wide range of medieval genres, gender 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 gender 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

Peter L. Allen, Pomona College

¹Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

²Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1949), 187, 104.

⁴Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy (Paris: Champion, 1973-1985); *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983).

⁵Armand Strubel, *Le Roman de la Rose, Etudes littéraires* (Paris: P.U.F., 1984), 24.

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 con jons, / et par desus siet li 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.

⁷Compare on this subject Harley, "Narcissus" 333, and Maxwell Luria, *A Reader's Guide to the Romance of the Rose* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 45.

⁸See 11159-82 (Lecoy ed.).

⁹See Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century*, trans. Robert Dewnsnap et al. (Lund: Gleerups, 1967), 87; cf. also Harley, "Narcissus" 331-35, and Edward K. Rand, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid in *Le Roman de la Rose*" in *Studies in the History of Culture* (Menasha, WI, 1942): 117.

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.

¹²See Evelyne Patlagean, "L'Histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance," *Studi medievali*, ser. 3.17 (1976): 597-632.

¹³Heldris de Cornuaille, *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1972); Garland Press has also recently published an edition with English translation.

¹⁴See Roberta Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Romance* (forthcoming, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁵Douin de Lavesne, *Trubert*, ed. G. Raynaud de Lage, *Textes littéraires français* 210 (Paris and Geneva: Droz, 1974).

¹⁶See the *Recueil général et complet de fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, eds. Anatole de Montaigon and Gaston Raynaud, 6 volumes (Paris, 1877; rpt. Burt Franklin Research and Source Works Series, 47 [New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.]).

¹⁷On play in medieval literature, see Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982); see also Peter L. Allen, *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the "Romance of the Rose,"* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), particularly Chapter 2, and more generally, Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950; rpt. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955).

¹⁸Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 1991 International Congress of Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University and at the 1991 Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Studies Conference at Rutgers University. I would particularly like to thank Simon Gaunt for his thoughtful assistance and suggestions.



COMMENTARY



AN ART HISTORICAL RESPONSE TO "GAY STUDIES AND FEMINISM: A MEDIEVALIST'S PERSPECTIVE"¹



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.² In 1976, Ilene Forsyth devoted an article to an early twelfth-century