

# Gendered Action in Medieval Narrative, History, and Art

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**T**HIS ISSUE OF *Medieval Feminist Forum* furthers what the editors and the contributors see as the central project of gender studies: to reconsider monolithic or overarching conceptions of gendered behavior and to offer more complicated, nuanced, and contextualized explanations for the way that medieval people considered themselves and their contemporaries in gendered terms. The study of gender in this issue might be considered in terms of stages: first revealing that medieval gender models are often different from modern ones, but then going further to explore gender and identity in terms of multiple and coexisting models in any period and place. The articles in this issue accomplish this by offering readings of identity-building actions and activities within their specific historical, cultural, and literary contexts. Furthermore, this issue considers gender not just in terms of performance, but also in terms of more conscious and deliberate actions by which medieval people might concretize, re-imagine, or redefine both their own gendered identities and those which they encountered. Thus, in this issue we focus on the narration of action, all the while remaining cognizant that, in many cases, narration itself is often an action that also engages the very structures of gender and identity.

The articles appearing in this issue engage a number of issues relevant to thinking about gendering in the Middle Ages. They show how actions are used to constitute a working gender identity, they probe the heuristics employed to gender action, they narrate women's actions outside social expectations, and they also model the different modes of reception governing actions that fall outside conventional models. The papers in this issue focus on four major themes: these include first, women's exercise of political power and its reception; second, passivity

and activity in sexual and love relationships, as well as upon the conventions for showing affection within them; third, the materials that reflect on the very process of gender construction through recurring topics of dressing and cross-dressing; and fourth, gendered religious iconography of bodies and dress. In all of these cases, gender is constituted through action, but it is examined, probed, and in some cases destabilized through action as well.

Essays by Colleen Slater and Barbara Goodman focus on women's action in the political sphere. In "So Hard was it to Release Princes whom Fortuna had put in her Chains': Queens and Female Rulers as Hostage- and Captive-Takers and Holders," Colleen Slater presents historical examples of women who retain their own gendered identities even while acting outside the bounds of what medieval chroniclers and modern historians might assume or record. Noting a tacit assumption in medieval scholarship that female engagement with war was entirely passive, Slater demonstrates that women were often involved in every stage of the actions of taking captives and hostages. In doing so, Slater identifies the agency of female rulers as active participants fully involved in essential facets of medieval warfare. In "The City of Ladies; A Lady of Cities," Barbara Goodman reads narratives of ruling-class female agency in terms of city building, and explores the implications of authority and state building that necessarily follow. Tracing three narratives of female city building, Goodman finds a consistent citation of the Dido myth such that female city-building becomes a transgressive behavior that challenges social norms. Goodman then traces the narrative of Melusine into the Tudor period, arguing that its reintroduction in that period served to shore up the dynastic claims of Elizabeth of York, who becomes a "founding mother" figure very similar to Melusine.

Lynn Shutters and co-authors Montserrat Piera and Jody Shearn explore themes of activity and passivity in heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships. In "Marital Affection and the Medieval Lucretia," Lynn Shutters explores the ways in which the Lucretia legend, and her suicide, were received in later French narratives as a model for female behavior. Noting the problem that later medieval French readers would have had with an exemplum that revolved around suicide, Shutters finds

in the Lucretia legend a much larger discussion of gender-forming acts within marriage. In her examination of the perceptions of female actions in response to rape, marital vows, and reputation, Shuttles brings to light a much deeper conversation in medieval marriage discussions regarding female marital affection and the actions by which women might show, or fail to show, this affection. In doing so, Shuttles reveals some of the complications that emerge when gendered action is both required (to prove affection, for example) yet socially sanctioned (in the case of suicide and more generally in the case of female action in the face of an encouraged passivity). Montserrat Piera and Jodi Shearn also explore the interplay of culturally passive gender roles in the face of female action in their paper “Gendering Action in Iberian Chivalric Romance.” In exploring two Iberian chivalric romances, Piera and Shearn find representations of the female love object that resists the more stereotypical portrayals found in other chivalric romances. After establishing a culturally specific notion of desire in which sexual attraction is an essentially masculine activity, Piera and Shearn then demonstrate that the female agents in these narratives take on this masculine behavior as well as a spectrum of other actions that gender them as masculine even while they maintain their female attributes and identities.

Angela Jane Weisl and Saisha Grayson investigate the ways in which dressing and cross-dressing both construct and destabilize gender categories. Angela Jane Weisl explores the implications of profound shifts in cross-gendered behaviors and identities in “How to be a Man, Though Female.” Examining a range of texts, Weisl contextualizes transgendered behavior and demonstrates the essential role that dress and action play in the gendered identities of medieval narratives. Nature, she finds, continually yields to nurture in the case of transgendered behaviors, and so transgendered action destabilizes the biological underpinnings of masculine behavior while at the same time relying on masculinity as an active and affective category. Saisha Grayson also explores the ways in which a masculine model is both destabilized and concretized by women who would act, and pass, as men. In “Disruptive Disguises,” Grayson identifies visual representations of transvestite saints as attempts to fix, rather than loosen, a binary of gender division. Pointing out, as Weisl does, the

importance of dress and action in representations of identity, Grayson finds a consistent resistance to any depictions of transvestite saints that represent blurred categories or transition between categories.

Nancy Thebaut's "Bleeding Pages, Bleeding Bodies" also focuses on gendered iconography of bodies, as it offers a reading of MS Egerton 1821 that explains interaction with, and depiction of, Christ's blood as a female-gendered action. Contextualizing her reading in terms of an intense late fifteenth-century devotional interest in Christ's blood, Thebaut demonstrates the ways in which female users of this (and related) texts might have used blood devotion as part of a larger move to claim ownership of their spiritual activities by associating Christ's feminine attributes and blood with their own bodies and experiences.

The papers in this issue show how depictions of gendered action resist and destabilize categories, while at the same time they often reconstitute those categories. In this reconstitution, as Thebaut suggests, renegotiation and redefinition is also possible, and so action itself becomes a generative behavior that creates as it goes. These sorts of narratives are themselves actions that engage the very structures of gendered roles. For example, Weisl finds that, in the *Roman de Silence*, the categories of nature and nurture are both employed to explain and to question the formation of gender roles. So, telling the story of transgendering acts works to elaborate the structures by which gendering occurs. The sorts of studies appearing in this issue also continue to transform our perceptions of "what women did," as they disabuse us of some conceptions of the limitations of women's spheres of action. This is clear in Colleen Slater's article exploring medieval women's political practices of hostage-taking, which seems surprising because it does not fit into historical narratives of women's radical exclusion from the political sphere. The sorts of narratives discussed in this issue also engage exemplary literature; sometimes they reproduce it, at others they counter it, and in still other cases these narratives *become* exempla. We can see this engagement with exemplary literature for women's behavior in Lynn Shutter's article on the use of the Lucretia tale as model for thinking about the behavior of wives. In short, the authors show how these narrations of gendered action participate in a three-way dialogue on women's actions, with the texts and models they knew, and with the ones we know now.

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