Disruptive Disguises: The Problem of Transvestite Saints for Medieval Art, Identity, and Identification

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The lives of transvestite saints have benefited from a huge influx of new research since the entrance of Gender Studies into the medieval field. Almost all of this research, however, has focused on their hagiographies and cults from either a textual or socio-historical perspective, without special attention to their presence, or notable absence, within the visual sphere of representation. While literary scholars have delved into the nuances of each pronoun used to narrate these tales, art historians have hardly acknowledged transvestite saints, as individual figures or as a categorical topic. This imbalance in attention among the various scholarly fields derives logically from the material available—transvestite saints figure prominently in numerous textual sources while they are markedly scarce in medieval art—but it has unintentionally affected contemporary understanding of how medievals received these figures and interpreted their meaning. By focusing on evidence of the widespread dissemination of this trope in literature without considering the dearth of images produced to illustrate these tales, a primarily textual approach overestimates medieval acceptance of saintly cross-dressing. Taking an art historical perspective, this essay demonstrates that the popularity of transvestite saints in hagiographic or ecclesiastic writings belies the disruptive threat they posed to medieval visual representation and the stability of the symbolic order. Only by understanding why these stories were acceptable within textual narrative but problematic as artistic subjects can we fully appreciate how they operated within the medieval context, what social needs they served, and what reactionary restrictions they provoked. This paper will argue that visual, as opposed to linguistic, representations of transvestite saints
strike at the heart of two constitutive challenges to medieval cultural and spiritual practices. On one hand, they destabilize the formalized system of visual signifiers artists used to help their audiences identify a particular individual within a given image. On the other, by giving material form to the metaphoric and gendered language of spiritual transformation, they uncover the potential radicalism of medieval Christian theology’s teachings regarding the reformation of the self, the malleability of identity, and the transcendence of the body. In both cases, the desire to avoid images of boundary blurring, mutability, or metamorphosis underscores the degree to which the cultural presence of transvestite saints must be seen as linguistically managing, rather than effectively loosening, restrictions around gender divisions.

The first issue raised by images of transvestite saints intersects productively with the ongoing investigation of what portraiture might mean in the Middle Ages. Recent scholarly attention to this question has addressed both the conception of individuality at that time and how alternate visual signifiers would convey likeness and representation to a medieval audience. Through a shared matrix of symbols, physiognomy, dress, and, often, textual accompaniment, viewers could identify a historical or literary person without recourse to the kind of naturalistic facial renderings one associates with portraiture of the modern period. In particular, identification of saints was greatly aided by the regular use of attributes, visual symbols that developed over time to easily pinpoint an individual holy figure in a line-up of similarly attired and arranged bodies. Attributes tended to be derived from aspects of the saints’ lives that set them apart and signaled the meaning of their life, such as the instrument of their martyrdom like St. Catherine’s wheel or evidence of their miraculous deeds like the three children raised from the dead by St. Nicholas. For the medieval audience, a specific combination of physiognomy, dress, and attribute would come together to serve as a recognizable “portrait” of a saint; that is, Catherine’s wheel would work in conjunction with the youthful beauty associated with virgin martyrs and the regal dress of her social status to secure her “likeness.” At the same time, because they were identified through the figure’s alignment with a series of types, conforming to the exterior signs and symbols of a type was critical to the stability of this system for representing individuals.
Consequently, the importance of depictions of dress, as one of the most recognizable and consistent tools of representation and identification emerges across a range of studies on medieval portraiture. Representing a specific category of holy women whose distinguishing activity was dressing as monks (and therefore men) troubled the social divisions and signifying practice that structured medieval representation. For what is often left unexamined in writings on this matrix of supportive symbols is the degree to which these social categories and their signifying attire presume stable, fixed, cohesive identities in which the outer garb denotes not only membership in a group but adherence to that group’s many inherent properties. Medieval artists and viewers relying heavily on dress as a categorical signifier have few tools to represent deviations from one aspect presumed to be intrinsic to that group’s figuration. In particular, since gender ascription was the basis for dividing members of a similar social status or profession into complementary pairs (Kings vs. Queens, Knights vs. Ladies, Monks vs. Nuns), corporeal fashioning used to signify a pre-gendered group identity would automatically assign gender to all individuals dressed a certain way. So how was an artist to represent a transgression of the alignment between gendered type and biological sex, when the success of such a disguise was predicated on the societal focus on external dress as a delineator of so many other aspects of identity? The easiest answer was, of course, to not represent this kind of social breach at all. However, because of their unusual position as prominent and morally instructive historical persons, there was pressure on artists to give form to transvestite saints—even though they embodied a cultural practice that might otherwise have been happily left outside the bounds of visual representation.

Though written records of women who adopted men’s clothes appear across the full range of medieval literary sources, from tales of courtly love to hagiographies to historical or quasi-historical biographies, this activity was not reserved for mystics or romantic heroines alone. From the fourth through the fifteenth centuries, laws banning women from wearing men’s clothes are found in official records, indicating that this was a regular, real-world concern for medieval civic and ecclesiastic authorities. Transvestite saints, then, presented a problem for medieval artists and supervising Church authorities apart from the purely
representational. On one hand, there was the question of how to identify a holy woman disguised as a man. An even more troublesome quandary, however, would have been how to positively portray this “spiritually justified” gender-inversion without demonstrating the malleability of gender signifiers in general.

In addition to the obvious practical fallout that could come from encouraging cross-dressing among the populace, the malleability of outward forms of gender had profound theological implications with a medieval framework. As Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrates in her important article, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” medieval spirituality rooted much of its teaching in the relationship between outward forms and the individual’s interiority. She highlights how medieval theologians believed that modeling oneself in the *imago Dei* involved and enacted both inner and outer change, and often analogized spiritual reform to the process of being imprinted by a wax seal or donning a new garment. Further, she argues that this active shaping of the self was done not to better express an underlying, originary personality, but to better conform to a chosen type. “When [twentieth-century people] speak of ‘the individual,’ we mean not only an inner core, a self; we also mean a particular self, a self unique and unlike other selves. . . . The twelfth-century thinker explored himself in a direction and for a purpose. The development of the self was toward God.” Church writers encouraged followers to adopt the outer garb and actively perform the behavior of Christ as the first step in re-forming the whole being. “In general,” writes Bynum, “writers assumed that, in reform and moral improvement, exterior and interior will and should go together.” Therefore, when transvestite saints actively modeled themselves as holy figures of the opposite sex, they would have pointed to an uncomfortable and ultimately unacceptable implication of such a theory: that changing external social trappings and performing the behavior of male religious figures could fundamentally alter the gender of their whole being. Because of the misogynistic language embedded in Christian theology, in which God is masculinized as the Father and Son while original sin and sexual temptation are more closely associated with Eve and women, to aspire to God’s likeness is to aspire to masculine virtues and overcome female weakness. Transvestite saints,
then, threaten the hierarchy of genders by suggesting that this weakness could best be overcome by choosing to live as men. In turn, through their successful transformations, what were believed to be the biological, inborn failings of women were in danger of being revealed as socially constructed, undermining both the social and theological justifications for male dominance throughout the culture.

This medieval theorizing of the relation between internal and external forms, however, has a much broader implication for the idea of the self, whether male or female, religious or secular. It contains within itself the potential to undermine any originary and stable identity, any true self (whether gender, class, nationality, etc.) that can be disguised, if the disguise can also be understood as the first step in changing the very substance of one’s being. Surprisingly, because of this metaphysical conception of the self, a visual confrontation with “drag” in the medieval period presented a similar threat to the fictive “integrity of the subject” that Judith Butler argues it does in the twentieth-century within her deconstructionist theory of gender performativity. “In imitating gender,” she writes, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.”

Esther Newton, quoted by Butler, elucidates the challenge further, here assuming a biologically male performer:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says . . . “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ is feminine.

If we flip the genders and replace “soul” for essence, this is exactly the challenge that transvestite saints present to the gendered divisions of the Catholic Church and secular medieval society. While they may outwardly appear to be male monks, this “disguises” their anatomical sex, a “truth” that is always discovered at the end of their lives. However, as holy figures that have reformed their souls towards a male ideal, performing the role of a religious male is now arguably a more “true” reflection of their interiority. As Butler concludes, “Both claims to truth contradict
one another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity,”14 a displacement that severely undermines the legitimacy of misogynistic social structures, whether medieval or contemporary.

Note, however, that this destabilization is achieved by the dissonance between appearance and “truth;” that is, it is an effect of representations that problematize the evidentiary nature of the visual realm. If one cannot believe one’s own eyes, whether in images or in encounters with other people, is it possible to “know” anything? As such, it becomes understandable that images of transvestite saints would be limited in comparison to their hagiographic presence, and why those that do exist struggle with how to negotiate this delicate terrain. Comparing the many diverse, contradictory strategies employed by artists depicting transvestite saints, we can recognize the anxiety that this problem created and consider the significance of the choices made, and the options avoided, for medieval understandings of gender and representation.

In Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe, Valerie Hotchkiss catalogues thirty-four saints whose stories involve some instance of cross-dressing in order to serve God, maintain their virginity, or escape marriage to a pagan or conversion to paganism. This paper focuses on three saints, Saint Pelagia/Pelagius of Antioch, Saint Marina/Marinos, and Saint Eugenia/Eugenius,15 whose popularity in Western hagiographic sources would have ensured a widespread familiarity with their stories in Europe as well as in Byzantium, where most transvestite saint legends originated. From a contemporary perspective, their inclusion in medieval compendiums of saints’ lives has left a productive cross section of illustrative artworks, including manuscript illuminations, stone carvings, and tapestries. Equally important for our purposes, these saints were selected because cross-dressing was an important, sustained component within each of their lives, undertaken not for a brief escape or for the length of a journey, but to enable them to live as men. In fact, it is arguably only the successful and prolonged gender conversion itself that marks each of them as worthy of sainthood, making their primary distinguishing attribute the invisibility of their “true” identity. Looking at a number of examples from illuminated manuscripts, this paper will show that medieval artists relied heavily on
the accompanying text to identify the saint, narrate her story, and mitigate the significance of her transvestism. In fact, picturing transvestism is almost universally avoided, and writers assume the full responsibility for elaborating that aspect of the life. Outside of the manuscript context, portraying dual or disguised identities proves even more problematic, resulting in an almost complete lack of stand-alone works that represent saints from this category. Analyzing the two exceptions to this rule, a carved capital from Vézelay and a woven retable from Spain that both depict St. Eugenia, we shall see how far from the traditional repertoire the artists had to go to express transgender as an identifiable attribute. In the Vézelay sculpture, in particular, the instability that this image of Eugenia’s gender-bending provokes is discussed in light of two related phenomena, Romanesque marginalia and the mysterious Sheela-na-Gigs. Contemporary critics have pointed to both of these traditions as signs of a counter-language that encourages slippages between the sacred and the profane, the moral and the immoral. However, such ambiguity in the incontestably holy figure of a saint and in the presentation of something as fundamental as gender distinctions seems to have been far too threatening for adoption by later artists. Ultimately, the isolation of these works demonstrates the collective rejection of their solution in favor of images that could be inflected by the nuances of linguistic narration. For, while their stories were freely distributed and referenced throughout Church literature and teachings, as concretized, embodied, visual images, transvestite saints problematized the entire project of maintaining stable identities, social categories, gender boundaries, and signified meanings in the realm of symbolic representation. Reading Bynum’s theory of medieval “modeling” aimed at achieving a (male) spiritual ideal with Butler’s contemporary conception of the performativity of gender attributes, this paper asserts that visual images of female saints who had achieved maleness in appearance and behavior would have forcefully demonstrated a level of constructed identity that was already latent in medieval theology, but which had uncomfortable implications for gender divisions that Church and secular authorities did not wish to illustrate.
Illuminating Transvestite Saints

We will begin by comparing illuminations of the three saints from three sources—two related manuscripts, the *Vie de Saints* and Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, from the mid-fourteenth-century French scriptorium of Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston, both now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; and the *Morgan-Mâcon Golden Legend*, a mid-fifteenth-century French manuscript illuminated in the Flemish style, split between the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Bibliothèque Municipal in Mâcon, France.

The earliest manuscript to be considered, *Vie de Saints*, dates from 1348, approximately 500 years after transvestite saints transferred from Byzantine compendiums to Western vernacular hagiographies. Yet, despite the long-standing inclusion of transvestite saints in texts, the visual depictions evidence an unwillingness to show them in accordance with the requirements of the narrative. In two illuminations accompanying the life of Pelagia, the artist refuses to visually represent her gender inversion. In the first image [Fig. 1], Pelagia is shown on the left as a courtesan with an entourage of well-dressed youths engaged in conversation.

![Fig. 1: Sainte Pelagie et ses courtisans; Saint Nonnus priant](image-url)

*Fig. 1: Sainte Pelagie et ses courtisans; Saint Nonnus priant*, François 185, Fol. 264v *Vies de saints*, France, 14th century, Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston. With permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
Following Western medieval fashion, she and her female companions are distinguished from the men by long gowns, in contrast to the masculine style of shorter tunics and stockings.¹⁹ On the right, the Bishop Nonnus is kneeling in prayer, requesting the strength to resist Pelagia’s seductive charms. According to the narrative, his act of devotion inspires Pelagia to rethink her immoral ways, and she converts before him. Leaving her former life behind, she disguises herself as a male hermit and lives in a cave until her death, when her true sex is discovered. While the other illumination [Fig. 2] presents the second half of this tale, the artist does not follow the gender conversion outlined in the text. Our protagonist is instead shown to the far left as a nun, the white wimple around her neck signifying female religious attire, instead of as a monk or male ascetic.²⁰ Her body and hands point towards an architectural entrance rather than a cave, indicating participation in a sanctioned spiritual practice within the walls and authority of the Church rather than a private devotional retreat, another significant deviation from the text. Only at her death, pictured on the right, does the artist allow Pelagia’s body to transcend a specifically female gender assignment. Wrapped in a white shroud, Pelagia is completely obscured by the clothing of death, which has

Fig. 2: *Sainte Marguerite-Pelage, Funerailles de sainte Marguerite-Pelage*, François 185, Fol. 265v *Vies de saints*, France, 14th century, Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston. With permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
no gender ascription, being a category that eventually encompasses all humans, regardless of their station on earth. At no time however is the main signification of her unique story—the adoption of a male persona while alive—hinted at in the visual rendition.

The central importance of cross-dressing to the sainthood of Eugenia is likewise underplayed and a clear reading of gender and how it relates to the text is hard to ascertain. She is shown indistinguishable from her eunuch companions, Hyacinth and Protus, at the moment of martyrdom [Fig. 3]. Kneeling before the executioner’s sword, all in long tunics that indicate neither gender, class, nor affiliation with a religious order, these figures have no attributes that would signify their identity as anything other than martyrs. This ambiguity of gender is

Fig. 3: Martyre de saint Prote, saint Hyacinthe et saint Eugenie, François 185, Fol. 254v, Vies de saints, France, 14th century, Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston. With permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
further complicated by the fact that Eugenia, unlike the other two saints under consideration, is revealed as a woman before her death. Accused of seducing (or in some versions raping) Queen Melanthia, Eugenia was put on trial before her father, Philip, and dramatically “bared her sex” to prove her innocence. After this event, she was believed to have preached as a woman, converting her family and many others before her martyrdom. This illumination, then, presents a conundrum. On one hand, it is not directly contradicting the cross-dressing discussed in the narrative, only avoiding it, by portraying her after she is revealed as a woman. At the same time, it appears to be hedging this “return” to femininity by depicting her as indistinguishable from the eunuchs, offering a different kind of resistance to the narrative. Significantly, it also foregoes the dramatic potential of Eugenia’s trial and the revelation of a dual-sexed identity, which could serve as a unique visual marker or provide an attribute for this particular life. Instead, by depicting an unexceptional martyrdom scene, the image adds nothing to the matrix of symbolic identification and depends entirely on the accompanying text to indicate which saint is being beheaded.

In the related *Golden Legend* produced by the de Montbastons during the same period, we see the young St. Marina presented to the monastery by her father [Fig. 4]. This scene comes from the very beginning of Marina’s tale, after her mother died, when her father has decided that he wants to join a fraternal order. In order to enable them to stay together, Marina enters the community as a young boy and lives the rest of her life as a monk. In the accompanying image, both father and daughter wear matching garments. The girl’s hair is cut short while the father’s beard helps confirm his masculinity. While her youthfulness could arguably emphasize the longevity of her male disguise, it also, however, diminishes the degree to which the image would be read as a gender inversion. As Désirée Koslin argues in “The Dress of Monastic and Religious Women As Seen in Art from the Early Middle Ages to the Reformation,” unisex clothes are considered a staple of childhood, since children are thought of as pre-sexual beings, and it is actually this sublimation of sexuality and submission to child-like obedience that subtends the similarities and overlaps between the shapeless robes of both male and female religious. Ironically, then, this points to the
depth of the challenge that cross-dressing presents for the visual demarcations of medieval life and art, emphasizing the many ways in which the very attributes of holiness—unadorned, formless garments and bodies deformed by privation—made subverting the outward signs of gender easy. At the same time, the theological teachings of chastity, seclusion, and privacy were behavioral guidelines that made maintaining such a lifelong conversion possible. Marina’s submissive humility is an important part of her story. She, like Eugenia, is accused of sexual misconduct, specifically, fathering the child of a local innkeeper’s daughter. Marina however does not defend herself by revealing her biological sex and instead accepts responsibility for the child. It is only after Marina’s death, as they are preparing her for burial, that the brothers are astonished to

Fig. 4: *Sainte Marine présentée au monastère*, François 241, fol. 139v. *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, translated by Jean de Vignay. French, 14th century, illuminated by Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston. With permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
find the female body, which proves both her chastity and innocence. By picturing Marina as a child, she is cast immediately as asexual and humble, ideal traits for all religious figures of the time.

The other manuscript under consideration is the *Morgan-Mâcon Golden Legend*, illuminated between 1445 and 1465. Stylistically, the book represents a distinct shift from the undefined forms and flat frontal planes of the de Montbastons’ fourteenth-century illuminations toward more realistic depictions of figures, space, landscapes, and architectural settings and significantly more complex compositions within each frame. However, a vacillation in the approach to transvestism can still be seen, suggesting a tradition of divergent strategies for each story. Pelagia is once again shown as a bejeweled courtesan in life and a female-attired nun in death [Fig. 5]. This later version focuses on the moment of her conversion, showing her kneeling in a fashionable gown and elaborate, flowing headdress before Bishop Nonnus in the center. It includes

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Fig. 5: *Pelagia, the Penitent with Nonnus of Mesopotamia and Death*, Morgan Mâcon Golden Legend, IV, fol. 134r. Flemish/French, 1445–1465, text by Jacopo de Voragine, translated by Jean de Vignay. With permission from The Morgan Library, New York.
another detail from her story, in which a devil approaches her the night after her conversion begging her not to abandon him. This devilish apparition points out that he is the source of all her earthly riches, which prompts her to give all her clothes and jewelry to the poor and adopt the lowly garb of the hermit. However, though we see the fleeing devil, we do not see the penitent’s robes that helped her banish him from her life. The small, reposing figure of Pelagia that is discovered by the bishop in the upper right corner is clearly feminized, attired, even in death, as a nun with white veil and wimple. Following the earlier model as well, her spiritual life, post-conversion, is not associated with a hermit’s cave. Instead, she is shown in female garb occupying an architectural frame, this time a well-appointed, gothic church.

Similarly, Eugenia and her two eunuchs are found at the scene of their martyrdom [Fig. 6], again skipping the parts of her life in which she would have been cross-dressed and the trial scene where her conflicting

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Fig. 6: *Protus, Hyacinth, and Eugenia of Rome: Martyrdom*, Morgan Mácon Golden Legend, IV, fol. 74v. Flemish/French, 1445–1465, text by Jacopo de Voragine, translated by Jean de Vignay. With permission from The Morgan Library, New York.
gender was uncovered. Kneeling in a row on a hillside, the three martyrs all have halos, though the first eunuch’s head is already on the ground, separated from his body. Hyacinth and Protus are still shown wearing shapeless nondescript robes. Taking advantage of the increased realistic detailing, however, Eugenia is now markedly distinct from her eunuch colleagues. No longer dressed in unisex attire, she is fully feminized in a low-cut, shapely long gown, with elaborate draping sleeves and her hair pulled back in a complex bun. Her dress and physique not only inscribe her as unmistakably feminine, but also affirm her class status as a ruler’s daughter, an identity in line with the manuscript’s target audience. In this case, the artist fully committed to her as a female martyr and left any hint of gender-ambiguity to the accompanying text.

For this investigation, the most notable illumination from this manuscript is the one accompanying Marina’s tale [Fig. 7]. Instead of showing Marina as a young child entering the monastery, or posthumously as a

Fig. 7: Marina the Disguised: Death of Father, Morgan Mâcon Golden Legend, III, fol. 279v. Flemish/French, 1445–1465, text by Jacopo de Voragine, translated by Jean de Vignay. With permission from The Morgan Library, New York.
recuperated nun, the Morgan-Mâcon artist portrays her at the moment of her father’s death. This scene, from the middle of her life, shows her deeply embedded in monastic life and the brotherly community, having lived among them and been accepted as a man for a significant portion of time. In the image, Marina, dressed as a monk, kneels before the abbot and several monks, who seem to be comforting her, while inside the gothic architecture, her father lies on his deathbed, three monks by his side. This image could arguably constitute an unusual instance of an artist not just allowing the gender conversion to be depicted, but consciously attempting to portray a woman in men’s clothing. Dating from the mid-fifteenth century, the artistic detail is sufficient to notice a discernible difference between young Marina’s tonsure, which is a delicate line that creates a halo effect, and the shaggy bunches of hair that ring the heads of her fellow monks, including the abbot’s, where frontal baldness even disrupts the full encircling of the head. Similarly, her upturned, unlined face seems smoother than her companions and receives none of the darker shadowing that suggests jowls or five o’clock shadows on the others. However, one could equally argue that these are traits of youth rather than intentional signs of femininity. Perhaps the most interesting way to think about this problem is the fact that youthfulness, and its prefiguration of secondary sex characteristics, is exactly how women were able to carry off transgender disguises in real life. Therefore the instability of this image and our inability to confirm whether the artist was in fact trying to feminize this young monk or simply adhering to standard representations of youth plays into an acknowledgment of the difficulty of assigning biological sex based on visual signifiers. In this way, the artist’s distinction between the youthful Marina and the older monks is in keeping with the narrative’s conceit and opens up the space for a more nuanced reading of both image and text than any other so far encountered. At the same time, since she has no symbolic attribute, any interpretation that would note the possible femininity of the kneeling figure would still be dependent on the textual narrative and familiarity with the trope of the transvestite saint and Marina’s story in particular.

The overall message of the image, however, seems to be a reinforcement of the ideals of community as discussed by Bynum. Marina’s
cross-dressing is not portrayed as an individual feat, but as a tool for successfully melding herself into the monastic life and becoming integrated into the brotherhood. Looking up at the abbot’s face as she kneels in prayer, Marina is part of a supportive circuit that goes from her clasped hands to the abbot, who rests his hand on her shoulder in blessing, to the three monks behind her, the last of whom reaches out to comfort her with a hand on the back. Her father’s deathbed mirrors this scene, the three indistinguishable monks behind him asserting the continuity that such a shared likeness, and therefore shared identity, produces among the servants of God. Having actively reformed their exterior dress and activities to follow the same patterns, she and her brothers are working towards the identical goal of an inner life molded into the likeness of Christ. Her true self might not be revealed by her unshaved cheeks, but instead by the degree to which she has become one with a male group identity in a “valorization of sameness” that is argued to structure the discourse of imitation. As Bynum writes, the “‘discovery of self’ is coupled with and understood in the context of ‘discovery of model for behaviour’ and ‘discovery of consciously chosen community’.”

In Marina’s case, however, the choice involves a reorganization of gender and moral alignments. As Butler argues, this performance of gender disconnected from biological sex has the potential to reveal that, “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin.” Through holy self-fashioning, Marina trumps the supposed “difference” of gender with the supposed “sameness” of imago Dei, but in doing so underscores the presumed masculinity of Godliness. Showcasing the predicament that the Church’s conflicting language produced for women, the illumination vacillates between an appropriate, general encouragement to follow exemplary models and a literalized endorsement of cross-dressing as a theologically-supported, logical way to develop the self toward God.

As this overview demonstrates, medieval illuminators are not necessarily sure how to treat their cross-dressed subjects, refusing the gender-inversion in some cases, carefully selecting scenes from before or after transvestism in others, and then sometimes allowing the disguise to stand, showing a male-attired or unisex figure as their protagonist. Regardless of artistic approach, the images end up relying almost entirely
on the text to narrate the transvestism, with any given figure aligned with a singular gender, either a noblewoman, monk, or nun, in any one image. There is no effort to create a conflicted reading between the outward signs of gendered clothing and the wearer’s inherent biological sex, with the possible exception of the final Marina illumination in the Morgan-Mâcon. Ultimately, no formal means is developed within the manuscript setting to attributively signify a cross-dressed individual. In turn, this dependence on the text to elaborate the exceptional qualities and characteristics of transvestite saints relegates them to a very limited set of visual representations that is in marked contrast to their literary popularity. For apart from their appearance in manuscripts, Eugenia, Pelagia, and Marina and their fellow transvestite saints are almost never depicted in any other artistic context. They are not shown as intercessory saints in panel paintings or frescoes, nor have reliquary or freestanding statues been found. Without a distinguishing attribute, they seem to have no ability to signify as stand-alone figures. The distinctiveness of their dual identity seems impossible for the medieval to represent in the singular, with two fascinating exceptions.

Depicting Transvestism

As has been noted before, Saint Eugenia’s story, with its climactic trial scene, could be considered uniquely capable of signifying a duality of gender in a single image. A depiction of the moment where she stands before her father, the judge, with her male clothes in stark contrast to her uncovered female body would make her recognizably different not only from typical male and female saints, but also from her fellow transvestite saints as well. However this opportunity is taken up in only two known works of art: a capital in the cathedral of Vézelay [Figs. 8, 9, & 10] and an altar frontal from Spain, now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, both of which significantly predate the manuscripts discussed earlier. In both, Eugenia is depicted standing before a seated judge pulling apart her monk’s robe to reveal her feminine body, which clashes emphatically with her tonsured, nearly bald, head. The full weight of her instructive parable—her renunciation of royalty, her humble, chaste, and exemplary service as a monk, her successful subterfuge, and the unfounded
accusations of sexual impropriety—are all contained and conveyed in this singular, powerful, and defining moment from her life.

In the only scholarly essay to expressly address the visual, rather than literary, representations of transvestite saints, “Two Cases of Female Cross-Undressing in Medieval Art and Literature,” art historian Kirk Ambrose considers the implications of the Eugenia capital and antependium. Unfortunately, while a categorical overview is understandably outside the scope of his brief article, without knowledge of the actual balance of Eugenia images, I believe Ambrose misreads the significance of his two examples. Arguing that these works are not “anomalies or curiosities,” Ambrose attempts to place these scenes of cross-undressing at the beginning of a historical shift in the twelfth century from images of Eugenia’s martyrdom to images that “highlight the gender confusion that characterizes her vita.” What his limited focus obscures from view is that these are in fact the only such images known of Eugenia—or, for that matter, of any other transvestite saint—and are historically bracketed

Fig. 10: Trial of Eugenia, view from below. Nave Capital 59 in Sainte-Marie-Madeleine at Vézelay, c. 1120. Photo used with permission of Jim Forest (http://www.flickr.com/photos/jimforest/3690454573/sizes/o/).
on both sides by a preference for martyrdom images. Therefore, they should be not be seen as demonstrating an increasing comfort among Church authorities and artists with “emphasizing, albeit in different ways, the ability of the female body to be dressed as either a male or female,” but rather that, faced with these representations of the visual malleability of gender constructions, future images of transvestite saints were purposefully relegated to a textual setting where gender ambiguity could be handled at a linguistic level with the aid of narrative.

As the only such occurrences found within ten centuries of Eugenia images, these examples seem to indicate that, despite its visual clarity, this composition is used as a “last resort” strategy when contexts cannot relieve the artist from the primary responsibility for identifying the particular saint. At the same time, both instances of artistically represented cross-undressing appear at least a century before the first western manuscripts under consideration, with the capital dating from approximately 1120, and the Spanish frontal from the first half of the thirteenth century. With that in mind, they may simultaneously be said to demonstrate the visual flexibility of “first attempts,” which later get codified into safer intertextual strategies. Indeed, as artists began to respond to the growing popularity of these Byzantine figures in western sources, we see them experimenting with ways to incorporate the saints into an iconographic repertoire heavily reliant on recognizable attributes for individual identification. In particular, rather than positioning the capital as a turning point towards more flexible depictions of gender construction, it should be seen first as coming out of an obligatory search for the singular, defining element that could be the basis for a visual attribute, “the moment’ in a [Saint’s] life . . . in which the whole soul is reaching out to its destiny,” in response to a growing Eugenia cult in Northern Burgundy. Secondly, it should be seen as a fortuitous intersection of this artistic exploration with the tradition of Romanesque carving, known for mining the instability of its visual imagery. As Ambrose notes, Romanesque marginalia and its aesthetic conventions “delighted in the creation of tensions, whether thematic or formal, through the juxtaposition of contraries.” It often produced this experience by contrasting the primary iconographic program of Christian mythology with marginalia carvings of transgressive subjects,
under the guise of warning against sinful activity.\textsuperscript{37} This is certainly the case at Vézelay, where capitals depicting saints are interspersed with capitals presenting Despair and Lust or Profane Music [Figs. 11 & 12]. It is therefore important to recognize that both aspects of Romanesque aesthetics are at play in the carving of Eugenia’s trial. The appreciation for enigmatic oppositions, which required active contemplation on the part of the monastic audience, resulted in the only known attempt by a medieval artist to convey the idea of transvestism in a stand-alone work of art. As Ambrose asserts, “[i]n its precise choice of narrative moment, the Eugenia capital . . . straddles a number of irreconcilable polarities, such as male and female, nature and nurture, that startle viewers and provoke reflection on the significance of the scene.”\textsuperscript{38} But there is a second dimension to this imagery. It opened up an inter-iconographic dialogue between images of salvation and salaciousness, between chasteness and

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*Fig. 11: Despair and Luxuria (or Lust), Nave Capital 15 in Sainte-Marie-Madeleine at Vézelay, c. 1120. Photo used with permission from Anthony Weir and www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk (http://www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/zxVezelay.jpg)*
dangerous female sexuality, and therefore created an entirely different set of irresolvable concerns. By drawing from visual representations of seduction and sin to portray a holy figure, Eugenia’s carvers also straddled the division between the sacred and the damned in Romanesque marginalia, leaving not only her gender but also its theological and metaphysical implications ambiguous. Rather than managing the desires excluded by Christian ideology through a displacement into marginalia, the Eugenia carving showcases the Law (literally represented here by the Father), its necessary transgression (represented by her forced adoption of male garb), and its potential overthrow (evidenced in the body that refuses to signify in the singular) in the same space.39

While Ambrose’s interpretation of the capital notes that the figure “bares her breasts” to prove her femininity, which he sees as in keeping with an interpretation put forward in the Anglo-Saxon translations of her vita, other scholars have pointed to the possibly vaginal indentation in the center of her torso as evidence that the carvers were following the more widely referenced, but more ambiguous, Latin, “scudit a capitae tunicam, qua erat induta, et apparuit feminine.”40 While curving breasts are visibly peaking out of the top of her habit, the pointed oval shape of the cavity, accentuated by the labial folds of Eugenia’s robe, supports a genital reading. Either way, this tension between possible interpretations
is in line with the play evidenced in Romanesque marginalia between proper theological interpretations and more scandalous imagery, allowing different audiences to see different things in the same imagery. Further, the confrontational stance and central action of exposing a nude body links the capital to the tradition of exhibitionists and acrobats found in French marginalia throughout the twelfth century [Fig. 13], and in turn, to the mysterious Sheela-na-Gigs that are now believed to have originated from that tradition before flourishing in Romanesque architecture of the British Isles from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century [Fig. 14].

In their book, *Images of Lust*, Anthony Weir and James Jerman argue that continental marginalia figures of sin—often represented by the figure of Luxuria and other lustful, lascivious women—are the source
for the puzzling Sheela-na-Gigs, rather than pagan goddesses held over from Celtic memory. As one of the most popular starting points for the pilgrimage route from France to Santiago de Compostela, known as the Way of Saint James, Vézelay would have been a possible source of inspiration for later Sheela-na-Gig imagery since most of the female exhibitionist figures are noted as appearing along this route before transitioning to the British Isles in the form of the Sheela-na-Gig. Weir and Jerman have specifically pointed to the Vézelay capital featuring Lust or Luxuria [Fig. 11] as part of their study of Continental precursors, but I would posit that the central-core imagery of the Eugenia capital is morphologically even closer to the Sheela-na-Gigs, whose aggressively pulled apart vaginas echo the gripping hands and pulled back curve of Eugenia’s robe. Again, arguing against Ambrose’s premature
closure of this issue, which asserts that connections to Sheela-na-Gigs are falsely based on a contemporary misreading of the crevice as vaginal, the direction of influences from Vézelay to the British Isles means that intentionality is insignificant. A medieval misreading of this “play of shadows” could have equally resulted in an interpretive reworking as a Sheela-na-Gig by artists, pilgrims, or patrons drawing inspiration from the cathedrals along the Way of Saint James.45

Juliette Dor, in her article “Sheela-na-Gigs: An Incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity,” suggests a dialectic in which the exhibitionist figures from the Continent mix with a tradition of pagan goddesses who have contradictory attributions of both fertility and destruction.46 One can argue that the Eugenia capital fits within a very similar dialectic negotiation of Christian theology, psychology, and folk traditions. While Eugenia is a holy figure, the act of exposing one’s sexuality seems to have led the sculptor to draw from salacious exhibitionist imagery which was originally intended to warn Christians away from sins of the flesh. In this case, however, this shocking frontal exposure is in service of a story in which exhibitionism takes on a reversed value. At the same time, the entire category of transvestite saints is tentatively linked to mythological narratives of the cross-dressing trickery of the pagan gods,47 so it is not surprising to find this type of saint portrayed at first in a way that might be similar to demonstrations of unchristian-like activities. Finally, it is equally a reminder that despite its masculine attire and saintly behavior, the female body present in the tales of Eugenia, Marina, and Pelagia is still seen as a source of temptation and fertility, a negative attribute which they partially transcend through emulation of masculinity, but which retains a potentially seductive effect that also needs to be warned against. What the similarities to Sheela-na-Gigs and marginalia exhibitionists exposes, then, is the excess of the Eugenia capital, the way in which the female body cannot be fully rewritten as a sign of holiness.

Pointing to Michael Camille’s work on marginal representations, Dor stresses the counter-language inserted into medieval spaces by subversive marginalia that juxtaposed the sacred and profane.48 In adapting this tradition to portray a subversive saint, then, carvers were able to use this juxtaposition within the diegesis of the story itself, pointing to both her holiness and the threat she posed to the stability of the symbolic
order. By mirroring the sinful exhibitionists, she is morphologically aligned with the function of “warning against,” even while her compositional placement amongst more familiar saints like St. Anthony and St. Benedict reminds the viewer of the moral lessons of chastity and devotion that this complex composition literally embodies. Dor goes on to suggest that the Sheela-na-Gigs combine a psychoanalytic fear of castration and the power of virgins with the warning role of Christian exhibitionist marginalia. Eugenia falls well within this paradigm as well, but perhaps as an even more dramatic and problematic example—for her image is the ultimate realization of the castration complex. Shown at the moment of discovery, Eugenia brandishes her lack of the phallus in contravention to the penis that the male clothing promised. In this scene, too, it is this very lack of a penis that both defies the male Law, under which she should be a subservient daughter, and yet assures the viewer that she is an innocent virgin, embodying masculinist ideals of female virtue and therefore worthy of Christian sainthood. So this is both a positive, Christian sermon in stone and a frightful image of female power, deceptiveness, and difference. This instability of meaning fits with the reading of marginalia put forward by Camille that it was understood by medievals as in constant negotiation, “working across and even within different and competing value systems . . . making it impossible to ensure that images initially aimed at stimulating a prohibition do not also have the affect of stimulating transgression.”

Eugenia, who would later be used as a straightforward illustration of Christian morality and martyrdom, here can still be seen as warning against dangerous femininity and gender transgressions. The problem, of course, is that she does so as a commendable saint rather than as an intentionally tantalizing figure of prohibition.

Looking at the only other portrayal of Eugenia’s courtroom cross-undressing, the image from the Spanish retable tapestry, while still distinctively transgendered, appears less confrontational and is contained within a more traditional compositional structure. If the decontextualization of the capital placement forced an artist to the most blatant display of transvestism in medieval art, the altar frontal represents a midpoint between such absolute isolation and the textual glossing provided in a manuscript setting. The moment of revelation is placed within a familiar
martyrdom cycle of eight images in two zones. This context helps to recoup Eugenia’s imagery back into a standard format and ultimately depicts the reestablishment of proper gender divisions as she is tortured, killed, and accepted into heaven as a female virgin in the final four frames. While very little is known about this retable other than its provenance in either Catalonia or Aragon, the trial scene appears very similar in pose and composition to the Eugenia capital. Given the unusualness of this particular iconographic solution, I must disagree with Ambrose one last time in his assessment that these are necessarily “unrelated images of female cross-undressing from different regions across Europe,” with its attendant implication that a multiplicity of gender-bending images developed throughout the Continent. Rather, Vézelay’s long-standing link to Spain as the starting point for the Way of Saint James makes it quite possible that the capital could have served as inspiration for this later work. The main divergence in these compositions is the placement of a figure kneeling before Eugenia in the altar frontal, identified by the crown as Queen Melanthia. Supporting the argument that this was both an adaptation and toning down of the Vézelay capital, the crown conveniently covers the lower part of Eugenia’s torso, where, if the artist was copying the earlier work, he might have had to include the elongated orifice that appears vaginal in the capital. Further, a slight shift in Eugenia’s stance reduces the confrontational outward gaze of the sculpture, instead angling the revealed body and Eugenia’s face towards the judge rather than the viewer.

Confirming the purposeful rejection of Eugenia’s cross-undressing as a pictorial solution for depicting transvestism, a 1463 copy of Vincentius Bellovacensis’s *Speculum Historiale* shows perhaps the most stubborn refusal of gender-inversion so far encountered. In defiance of both the familiar narrative and logic itself, the trial scene is illuminated here with a feminized Eugenia, in a full nun’s habit, being accused by Melanthia, who gestures on her knees before the judge [Fig. 15]. Combining the trial scene with female attire undermines the dramatic arch and confuses the purpose of the characters’ actions since Melanthia would be unlikely to bring a nun to trial for attempting to seduce her, and Eugenia would have no recourse for defense if she was already unmasked, which in turn would fail to impress her father whose conversion is premised on his
daughter’s disclosure. Perhaps in a strange nod to the revelation that should be underway, the lower right corner of Eugenia’s black robe is inched up demurely to show the white tunic underneath. Hiked skirt or not, this humble, downcast-eyed Eugenia, who stands passively awaiting judgment, seems a far cry from the confrontational, threatening, gender-bending Eugenia that was briefly imagined and given form in Vézelay.

**Describing Rather than Visualizing**

The decision to forgo the attributive clarity of transvestism in Eugenia’s trial in favor of either martyr scenes or narrative inconsistency proves the difficulty transvestite saints presented to visual representation in the medieval period. Ironically, the multiplicity of strategies used to manage this issue created considerable problems for medieval artists and audiences as well. If, as many scholars have put forth, the medieval system
of identification relied on a reinforcing relationship between symbols, image, text, and context, then images intermittently disagreeing with the accompanying narrative would have significantly disrupted that symbiotic relationship. At the same time, when dress hides rather than reveals the biological sex of the figure in question, it produces incongruence not just in that specific image, but in all other images throughout the manuscript as well. In both cases, whether artists decide to ignore the narrative and break the bond between image and text or to actually depict a cross-dressed woman indistinguishable from her male counterparts, viewers find they cannot trust what they see. By sometimes mirroring the text, and other times not, the stable relationship between images and text is disrupted. By making the reader decide whether to believe the words or the painting in select cases, all other presumably symbiotic presentations are called into question as well. Meanwhile, by occasionally still depicting the saints as successfully disguised, these characters produce an anxiety regarding the “maleness” of the other men in the manuscript. If the female, dressed as a monk, looks the same as all the other monks, how can the viewer trust the stability of the identity of other figures? With this alignment between outer expression and inner self complicated, all of the characters suddenly become open to reinterpretation. In total, transvestite saints’ entry into the field of vision automatically destabilizes both linguistic and artistic forms of representations and problematizes notions of identity and identification.

While the multiplicity of responses to this challenge affirms the contemporary literary interpretations of transvestite hagiographies as evidence that medievals were less binary than one would presume, allowing slippages and gender-confusion within narrative structures, it also supports most of their findings that in the end, this apparent openness ultimately concludes with the restoration of proper gender alignment and praise for these saints as women. In manuscript form, the moralizing exegesis can be interwoven throughout the course of the story, with proper theological significance and biblical antecedents pointed to by intertextual references. Images are harder to gloss and show only singular moments from a given life. As much as possible, then, medieval artists left it to the text to navigate the complexities of a masculinized female spirituality that was to be both praised and yet kept from
modeling actual behavioral practices within the normal realm of social relations. As a first step, by framing transvestism as a radical act undertaken by saints, often with the help of God, these hagiographies separate saintly gender subversion from daily affairs and place it in a mystical and mythical realm of allegorical teachings. Further, by linguistically narrating what is ultimately a visual transgression, the gender inversion is kept from being physically manifested as a real possibility. It is instead left to be read by Church fathers as a metaphoric allusion to more general theological teachings on the transformative power of Christian conversion and the necessity for women to renounce female weakness, sexuality, and materiality while embracing appropriately female virtues such as humility, faithfulness, and virginity. This delicate negotiation depends on encouraging women to spiritually transcend their sex without asserting that they could become social equals with men or leave the disruptive nature of their sexualized bodies behind.

As such, transvestite saints occupy a fascinating and unstable position at the crossroads of the medieval theological debate regarding female spirituality. In many ways, they exemplify all the inconsistencies, concerns, and consequences of a Christian model of faith that sought to secure male supremacy as divine law and yet open its message of transcendence and salvation to the entire human population. Throughout the medieval period, theological writings struggle to find justification for females’ access to spiritual achievement without disrupting the biblical hierarchy that aligns women with Eve and the guilt of original sin and men with Adam and imago Dei, being made in God’s image. In general, this results in language that frames female spirituality in masculine terms, so that holy women, by the very fact of their being holy, must have taken on some masculine virtues and rejected the inherent failings of their biological sex. Eugenia suggests as much when explaining her decision to become a monk, “And being a woman by nature, in order that I might gain everlasting life, I became a man.” Textually, such sentiments and stories could point towards a renunciation of female qualities, in particular the guilt of a sexually enticing body, and an appropriate aim towards masculine spiritual fortitude. As visual images, however, the metaphor becomes concretized, the visual deception demonstrated as completely attainable and externally imperceptible. The implication
within the medieval context would be a strange overlap between the theological preoccupation highlighted by Bynum with “conforming behaviour to types or models” and Butler’s contemporary theories of gender as a cyclical, reflexive enactment of stereotypes and normative behaviors. As Butler writes towards the end of Gender Trouble:

If gender attributes . . . are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. . . . If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural significance, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured, there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender and the postulation of a true identity would be revealed to be a regulatory fiction.

Likewise, if medieval group identity defines the individual, both inside and out, and group alignment depends on actively modeling oneself towards both the inner and outer ideals of the intended community, then medieval women performatively molding themselves in all their actions, attributes, and spiritual aspects to be male could potentially demonstrate that there is nothing innate or originary about gender. As they convincing fashion themselves as monks in body and spirit, they deconstruct, one could even say queer, medieval theology. They take Christianity’s promise of transformation literally, and in doing so, illustrate that the weaknesses and limitations of their gender, believed by their society to be determined by birth and divinely ordained, could be transcended by women simply refusing to model themselves on female group identities. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Church and its ruling-class patrons would rather not visualize what these particularly provocative role models would look like nor illustrate this disruptive guise as a path for women to emulate.

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∞ END NOTES

1. For just a few examples, see Valerie R. Hotchkiss, Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe (New York: Garland


4. Fernando Lazi and Gioia Lazi, *Saints and Their Symbols* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 219. In an interesting postscript, the authors of this contemporary compendium of saintly attributes mourn their declining use after the advent of photography. “Very rarely do photographs have the emblematic precision of a portrait . . . A photograph seizes a moment, not ‘the moment’ of a person’s life,” 30.

5. In addition to factoring into Perkinson’s symbolic matrix, Valentin Groebner draws attention to the integral role of clothing in the process of describing, remembering, and categorizing members of medieval society, and Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes how individual identity was constructed through active participation in categorical groups, such as religious orders, and was embodied through conforming one’s behavior to the appropriate exterior and interior manifestations of this model, including dressing a certain way to reflect one’s spiritual self. See Valentin Groebner, “Describing the Person, Reading the Signs in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe: Identity Papers, Vested Figures, and the Limits of Identification, 1400-1600,” in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton University Press, 2001), 24-25; Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980): 2-5, 9-11. See also Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).


7. Hotchkiss, 11-12.


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10. Ibid., 11.
11. Kari Elisabeth Børresen, “Religious Gender Models and Women’s Human Rights,” in The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture Religion and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles, ed. Richard Valantasis (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 195-97. The effects of this theology can be seen in the language used to praise religious women, for example, when Leander of Seville writes of the virgin, “Forgetful of her natural feminine weakness, she lives in manly vigor and has used virtue to give strength to her weak sex.” Likewise, menstruation and the pain of childbirth were considered punishments inflicted on members of the female sex because of Eve’s role in the fall from Eden. See Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 1-2, 228.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
17. Hotchkiss, Clothes Make the Man, 15.
18. Ibid., 14-15. All of the early transvestite saint stories are believed to have originated in Byzantine texts between the fourth and sixth centuries, with European imitators popping up later as these tales inspired either new instances of cross-dressing or the adaptation of the stories themselves to new territories.
20. Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia, ed. Margaret


22. For an interesting intertextual analysis equating Eugenia’s transvestism with eunuch or “third sex” status, see Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex,” 21-24. This image could then be seen as part of the visual strategy for early representations of Eugenia, which depict transvestism not as a completely successful male disguise but as taking on visual signifiers of the eunuch.


28. While there are a few other stories that involve the female cross-dresser being brought to trial, they all result in a “secret” unveiling, in which the woman is privately examined by nuns, who confirm her sexuality to the court, often allowing her to continue to live as a monk afterwards. Further, apart from St. Eugenia, I have not found evidence of these other saints—namely St. Susanna of Eleautheropolis, Hilary/Hilarion, and Apollinaris/Dorotheus—appearing outside of Byzantine traditions. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 131-41.

29. Kirk Ambrose, “Two Cases of Female Cross-Undressing in Medieval Art and Literature,” *Notes in the History of Art* 23, no. 3 (2004): 7-14. As Ambrose notes, images from Byzantium of Eugenia focus on her as a female martyr, but as discussed in the previous sections, so do later Western manuscripts. Ambrose’s broad-strokes introduction also creates significant problems. He begins by noting “Women who dress like men feature in a substantial numbers of saints lives and romances from the Middle Ages. The disguise typically enables a woman to flee an unwanted marriage, enter the religious life as a monk, or both. A handful of these stories contain a climactic episode in which a female cross-dresser, falsely accused of rape, must remove her clothes at a trial in order to prove her innocence. In at least two cases, Heldris de Cornualle’s *Roman de Silence* and the vita of Saint
Eugenia, medieval artists illustrated these scenes of what might be dubbed “cross-undressing”(7). In the absence of general scholarship on images of transvestism, his introduction’s telescoping from a “substantial number,” to a “handful,” to “two” leads to a misrepresentation of his case-studies as typical and his conclusions transferable. While many of the transvestite saints are accused of sexual impropriety, the majority, like St. Marina, humbly accept the consequences rather than reveal their secret. Of the three that are brought before a court, two privately confess they are women, and yet, are allowed to return to the monk’s life, and one is privately inspected by nuns who vindicate her. “Cross-undressing,” then, is characteristic of Eugenia’s hagiographic narrative, only.

30. Ibid, 8.

31. Preparatory research for this article included compiling relevant Byzantine examples as well. Images stressing her martyrdom include the mid-sixth-century mosaics of Eugenia among the virgin martyrs in San Appollinare Nuovo in Ravenna and a tenth-century manuscript, the Menologium II from the Vatican Library collection, which depicts her at the moment of martyrdom, and as discussed the later French illuminations have both selected martyrdom scenes for illustration.

32. Ambrose, “Two Cases of Female Cross-Undressing,” 8. Ironically, he does correctly identify the logic behind these two anomalies, as “images that adorned churches, with no textual cues to compliment their interpretation,” but then fails to recognize the isolation of such decontextualized representations of Eugenia.

33. As mentioned in note 29, research for this article compiled Eugenia images from the mid-sixth-century to the end of the medieval period in the fifteenth century.

34. Lazi and Lazi, Saints and Their Symbols, 30.

35. Ambrose, Nave Sculpture of Vézelay, 43.

36. Ibid.


38. Ambrose, Nave Sculpture of Vézelay, 43

39. Interestingly, Foucault elaborates his idea of the productivity of juridical restrictions in The History of Sexuality in relation to the taboo against incest. In Butler’s words, he argues that “the desire which is concealed is both original and repressed is the effect of the subjugating law itself.” This only adds to the significance of Eugenia’s confrontation with the Father, not only as an embodiment of the Law, but as a confrontation with the ultimate
forbidden desire that, for Foucault, is the effect of that law and at the same
time produces compulsory heterosexuality and enforces gender divisions.

40. Ibid., 42. Ambrose argues that the indentation is an unintentional
play of shadows, but having looked closely at images taken from multiple
angles, this author doesn’t find that a satisfactory conclusion. Even if on-site
examination could prove that the shape wasn’t carved, it still seems that,
whether a natural crevice in the stone or architecturally necessary drainage,
a master craftsperson would have been aware of the effect and could have
purposefully used it to create an ambiguous reading.

42. Ibid.
43. Dor, “The Sheela-na-Gig,” 37
44. Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, 72.
47. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex,” 6–7; Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the
Man*, 14.

48. Dor, “The Sheela-na-Gig,” 46. A similar argument is made by Pamela
Cox Miller, connecting the literary representations of female holiness with
Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s elaboration of the Grotesque as a strategy of con-
tradiction, in “Is There a Harlot in This Text?”
51. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, 30; Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed
Sex,” 10.

54. Miller, “Is There a Harlot in This Text?,” 420.
55. Studia Sinaitica 10 (London: C.J. Clay; New York: Macmillan, 1900),
6, (fol. 26a).
58. Ibid.