



# **Dispersed Selves, Excessive Flesh: Embodied Identity Flows in Three Middle English Narratives**

by Jamie A. Friedman

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DISPERSED SELVES, EXCESSIVE FLESH:  
EMBODIED IDENTITY FLOWS IN THREE MIDDLE ENGLISH NARRATIVES

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DISPERSED SELVES, EXCESSIVE FLESH:  
EMBODIED IDENTITY FLOWS IN THREE MIDDLE ENGLISH NARRATIVES

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My dissertation examines the embodied nature of identity circulations in three late fourteenth-century Middle English narratives that operate within and across the generic boundary of romance: *The King of Tars*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *The Knight's Tale*. These narratives take an interest in the construction of individual identities – chivalric, racial, religious, and erotic identities, in particular – as one of their defining characteristics, while deploying the body as the central terrain of that identitarian imaginary. Critics such as Susan Crane, Carolyn Bynum, H. Marshall Leicester, and Lee Patterson have characterized medieval narrative subjectivity as constructed, relational, and malleable. Yet even in this context of construct and change, these studies have tended to figure identity as essentially whole and, if malleable, have focused their attention on the end point of that identity mobility – at the knight's self-revelation, conversion, or avowal of a new communal affiliation – as the narrative affirmation of a finally coherent self. However, this insistence on sedimented identity becomes problematic when reading the fabulous narrative of the late fourteenth century, in which identities seem to come together and fall apart, move through series of beings, and commingle provocatively with racial/religious, class, and erotic Others. England's fourteenth century is marked by its increasing socio-political volatility, during which anxieties about all manner of circulations and instabilities permeate the ideological landscape: viruses, vernacular literacy, heresies, laborers,

monarchy, and eventually the monarch himself are all in sometimes violent circulation in this period. This age of conflict, crisis, and mobility provides a fertile historical context in which to examine the potentialities of identification: both the ways in which selves disaggregate or shift as well as the various narrative responses to that movement. Ultimately, this study suggests that traditional models of narrative identity do not adequately represent the potential fluidity of identification one finds in the literature of the period. I maintain that tracing the movements of excessive or eccentric bodies opens important, and critically overlooked, avenues for reading embodied selves in late medieval narrative, readings that allow possibilities for identities that are expansive, mobile, and richly complex.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jamie A. Friedman was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. She completed her undergraduate education at Whitworth University, in Spokane, Washington, specializing in English Literature and French, with minors in Philosophy and Biblical Studies. After completing a Master's degree in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature, with an emphasis on Literary Theory, at Portland State University, she earned her Ph. D. in Medieval Studies from Cornell University in 2010. She has taught at Whitworth University, Portland State University, Gonzaga University, and Cornell University. With her husband, Sidney, and her daughter, Isabella, she currently resides in Santa Barbara, California, where she is Assistant Professor of English at Westmont College.

To Mom, Grandpa, and Grandma, for ushering me in.  
To Sidney, Isabella, and Rachel, for unconditional love.  
To Apricot, Meadow, Steph, and Heather, for your constant invitation to see, hear, and  
Live.  
With gratitude beyond measure or limits.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Dispersed Selves, Excessive Flesh

“The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 148).

“...we face the fact that where our embodied, fully incarnate selves are most involved, we so often feel most strongly that we have run up against the limits of our language and its ability to express at all” (MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, 104).

“Perhaps the work of writing is, as Blanchot suggests, unworking, and most so when it touches upon what disintegrates or renders not whole, and what recollects or draws impermanently together. We begin with both many and one” (MacKendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory*, 8).

While Foucault’s pronouncement of the dissociated embodied Self generally initiates contemporary theoretical discussions of subjectivity – specifically creating an ethics and a politics that can accommodate non-binary accounts of being<sup>1</sup> – his picture of the dispersed self is just as appropriate a starting point for an examination of late-fourteenth century English narrative identities and bodies. I would like to spend some time outlining the intensely unstable period of England’s fourteenth century, regularly considered a period of the most intense crisis of authority, and I would say, crisis of

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<sup>1</sup> See Grosz, *Space Time and Perversion*, 83. For an account from cyber and scientific discussions of bodies that constitute shifting binarisms, see part one of Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche’s *The Body as Interface*, “Beauty, Biodesign, Human Nature.”

identity and circulation, in England's Middle Ages. The period is marked by its increasing socio-political volatility, during which anxieties about all manner of circulations permeate the ideological landscape: viruses, coins, vernacular literacy, heresies, laborers, and eventually, the monarch himself, who circulates right out of sovereign and corporeal existence.<sup>2</sup> The advance of the plague after 1348 meant broken communal ties, as "Father abandoned child; wife, husband; one brother, another...and none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship."<sup>3</sup> Freed from the familial and communal obligations that kept them rooted and identifiable, laborers' bodies circulate across the English landscape, immigrating to distant labor centers, abandoning villages and the patches of land that located their social identities.<sup>4</sup> This circulation of laborers was troublesome enough, with marked implications for the identifiability of their bodies, to motivate Gower's nightmarish vision of marauding peasants in Book One of the *Vox Clamantis*. Their wandering away from the lands that mark them, as they participate in what came to be known as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, is precisely what renders their bodies explicitly monstrous.

On the other end of the social spectrum, titles and lands begin to circulate in this period, which saw both the extinction of noble families and the simultaneous broadening of the "gentle" designation and the creation of a wider noble elite. This mobility of rank across social spectra contributed in part to the institution of regulations to delimit this movement. The sumptuary legislation of 1363, as well as the poll taxes of 1377 and 1379, and the 1413 Statute of Additions were enacted

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<sup>2</sup> For an overarching view of circulations across English society in this period, see Shoaf, *Chaucer's Body*; see also Woolgar, *Great Household*; Britnell, *Commercialisation of English Society*; Horrox and Ormrod, *A Social History of England: 1200-1500*. For the circulations initiated or accentuated by the plague, see especially Platt, *King Death*.

<sup>3</sup> Platt 5

<sup>4</sup> See Platt 9, 40-43

precisely to render circulating bodies legible again.<sup>5</sup> Increasing vernacular literacy created space for the broader circulation of ideas; and not coincidentally the fourteenth century, more than any previous century in England, saw a rise in what were viewed as heresies within the church as well as an increasingly vocal lay criticism of the church.<sup>6</sup> The fear of heresy was so great that in 1401 a new court, wanting to show its commitment to orthodoxy, passed *De Heretico Comburendo*, authorizing the church to burn those caught in relapsed or persistent heresy. Six years later, Archbishop Arundel passed some of the most strict anti-heresy legislation England had seen to that point.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the fourteenth century can easily be read as a period of marked identity circulations on many levels: national identity is under pressure both in the war with France and with the deposition of Richard; class identities appear much more fluid; the bounds of what it means to be a Christian, what kinds of practices are authorized, how that Christian body will manifest its piety, are all under consideration, all shifting. Perhaps in response to this accelerated circulation after 1348, the second half of the English fourteenth century was particularly marked by its focus on delimiting circulation, both corporeal and pestilential as well as the social and political movements that consequentially spring from those circulating bodies. While I'm not arguing that such delimiting moves were not present before 1348, I follow Platt, Shoaf, and others in acknowledging here the significance of the plague in highlighting the potentialities of circulations across social, political, religious, and ideological terrains. The late fourteenth and early fifteenth century acceleration of sumptuary laws, poll taxes, and statutes aimed at limiting access to vernacular literature and the

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<sup>5</sup> Horrox and Ormrod 43, 65. See also Maddern, "Social Mobility." Maddern also lists other legislation attempting to limit social mobility in the period, see especially 117.

<sup>6</sup> See Duffy 295, 321

<sup>7</sup> Duffy 326; see also Rubin 391

heresy it was feared to engender all acknowledge this period's increasing awareness of the impending illegibility or permeability of identity (as well as social structures) that threatens when some bodies circulate beyond their prescribed bounds; they attempt more precise stratification, more precise identification of bodies in the face of that increasing geographical and political circulation.<sup>8</sup>

Against this background of socio-political and somatic volatility, in which disease, famine, schism, and war pressed upon English bodies and identities with perhaps unparalleled force, I would like to examine how those bodies, and especially their somatic surfaces, are represented in the most popular literary genre of the period, the fabulous narrative, in order to tell the story of how the literature of the period responded to this identitarian and somatic mobility, the modes of response available to them, the ways in which contemporary readers can make sense of the bodies and identifications that populate this narrative landscape. I am choosing to focus on what I am terming fabulous narrative, as opposed to romance, which most literary historians agree was the most popular and enduring medieval genre, in order to capture several texts lurking on romance's generic periphery in which eccentric or excessive bodies are the terrain on which meaning materializes. The unstable or contested margins of romance's borders themselves help me to feel even more comfortable reaching beyond them, while operating within a loose constellation of texts spilling out from romance which employ the body as a central terrain of the imaginary. By "fabulous" I simply mean stories in which some element of the fantastical, the astonishing – via magic or the supernatural – intersects human narratives, and especially, marks itself upon the somatic surfaces of the narrative. Crane and others make the cogent point that because genre as a category was not an important marker for medieval theorists, nor did medieval poets themselves understand strict limits for *romance*, perhaps

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<sup>8</sup> See Pratt 63; see also Rubin 391-400

contemporary critics should not expect fixed and universal parameters of romance.<sup>9</sup>

Fourteenth century fabulous narrative seems particularly interested in presenting bodies operating at the boundaries of integrity or cohesion: bodies coming apart or opening up, bodies fantastically transformed or healed, bodies whose supple form pushes the limits of what it means to be human at all as they intersect with animal bodies, with the natural world, with non-normative human forms. I would like to ask what “potent fantasies” these bodies materialize in their frequent appearances in fabulous narrative.<sup>10</sup> There is “something more” in and across these excessive somatic surfaces, something more than the explicitly stated desire to discipline, or excite pleasure or disgust. These fabulous bodies materialize overdetermined, surplus moments in which, I will argue, identification is reinforced and mobilized.<sup>11</sup> If, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have argued, some fictions work “to propose, if not impose, models or types...by means of which an individual, or a city, or an entire people, can take possession of itself and identify with itself,” I would like to ask what kinds of identifications are mobilized, and frustrated, in these fictions, across their bodies?<sup>12</sup> What anxieties or exuberances about identifications do these eccentric or excessive bodies deploy? Can we articulate a kind of corporeal hermeneutic to access the identitarian flows in their play across these fleshy surfaces; a hermeneutic that illuminates, in part, the modes of response available to fourteenth-century writers and readers in the face of unprecedented identitarian shifts?

I would particularly like to explore how this narrative emphasis on circulations

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<sup>9</sup> Crane 10; see also Cooper 8, Putter 2. For flexible definitions of romance that invite peripheral genres into the conversation, see Field, “Romance in England”; Finlayson, “Definitions”; Krueger, “Introduction”; Galloway, “Writing History” 261-2; Smith, *Arts of Possession* 77-9; Gaunt, “Romance and other Genres”; Saunders 1.

<sup>10</sup> See Kay 83 for a discussion of the “potent fantasies” that romance mobilizes.

<sup>11</sup> See Uebel, “Muslim Monstrosity” in *Ecstatic Transformations* for his discussion of cannibalism in *Richard Coer de Lion* as another overdetermined and surplus narrative moment. The “something more” that attends Richard’s cannibalism is, according to Uebel, the “foundation of a community and the notion of enjoyment as communifying process” (48).

<sup>12</sup> See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 297; see also Uebel 45.

of bodies and identifications materializes across discrete narrative terrains, both how these narratives reproduce the kind of anxiety of circulation often viewed as exemplary of the period, as well as other, more optimistic or exuberant narrative responses to corporeal and identitarian mobilities, specifically racial/religious, chivalric, and sexual identities. Eccentric and excessive fabulous bodies are conjured to perform specific ideological, I would argue identitarian, work in the landscape of the narrative imaginary. My driving inquiry will be to question what identifications are materialized by the appearance of the eccentric or excessive body, and then to trace how those identifications are mobilized across the somatic surface as it circulates through its narrative trajectory. Each of the varied stories I propose to examine illuminate narrative strategies of response. In some instances excessive bodies seem to conjure up the specter of mutable, unstable, impermanent identities across the corporeal frontier in order to conjure away that threatening mobility. And yet in other narrative contexts, these excessive bodies materialize a mode of response in a different register than the anxiety of circulation commonly attributed to the period. These bodies also express an exuberance of identification, an exploration of the many becomings possible when one traces the trajectory of any body in its many circulations across excessive, eccentric, opened or ruptured somatic surfaces.

To facilitate this discussion, I turn to a series of texts ranging in composition from 1330 to 1400, all written in explicit response to the social, political, and religious movements productive of identitarian pressures of this period in England: *The King of Tars*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *The Knight's Tale*. I have selected these texts because each text does important work, then and now, in occupying the space of identitarian iteration in response to an explicit conversation about shifting notions of Self in communal affiliation. *The King of Tars* reiterates the motif of the monstrous offspring of interracial and interreligious union commonly repeated in

contemporaneous crusader chronicles. *The Siege of Jerusalem*, one of the most widely disseminated alliterative poems of the period, grapples with the limits of Christian identity in conversation with the religious Other. *The Knight's Tale* takes up the project of assimilating martially potent women into the service of traditional heterosexual domesticity. Examining these texts illuminates various narrative and ideological postures towards identity that were adopted in one of the most volatile, and productive, periods of identity slippage in medieval England.

Moreover, examining these identities as they materialize on narrative bodies puts these fourteenth-century iterations in dialog with contemporary theories of embodied selves in community, a dialogue that can only help enliven both medieval and contemporary discourses. Given the extraordinary pressures on racial/religious, class, and sexual identity in the late fourteenth century, this dissertation privileges certain representational moments in the medieval imaginary of the period as an important point of entry into a larger conversation – a conversation that is both intensely (post)medieval and intensely (post)modern – about how the movements of embodied identities materialize both their limits and their potentials across time and space. In these cross-temporal connections, I follow transhistorical models of time-bending which envision temporality not as unilinear and monolithic, but as labile, porous, and traversable. For example, Fradenburg argues for a “more complex engagement with the past than the boundary-drawing mediations of historicism” and Dinshaw “argues for time-bending ‘queer histories’, glossed as ‘affective relations across time’...that touch the past ‘to build selves and communities now and into the future’.” Catherine Brown writes about what it would be like to conceive of medieval and modern periods as coeval, what it would be like to be colonized by the Middle Ages, as Augustine thought that time bent upon itself when he asserted that Plato got all his good ideas from Christ. Jeffrey Cohen concludes that all times are coeval, with

the medieval as a kind of “meta-archipelago,” a plane across which “temporal interlacement” opens the “impossibility of choosing alterity or continuity (the past opens up the present to a multitude of futures).”<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the recent publication of both the *Post-Historical Middle Ages* as well as the inaugural issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* speaks to the relevance of considering transhistorical connections between then and now, dislodging the Medieval from a past over against which we may objectively speak or write, to explore the complex interlacings between past and present, to explore the ways in which we are complicit in the creation of our medieval past, and the ways in which that past speaks our present. This transhistoricism, and the ethical implications of facing the embodied identities I encounter in the following texts, informs my engagement with them. With close attention to language, and theoretical, literary, and social historical contextualization, I hope to fill out our understanding of the variety of medieval postures towards embodied identification, both anxious and exuberant, as narrative identities are drawn into the circulations resonant with real lived trajectories.

While these narratives range generically – crossing the terrains of romance, devotional, religious history, conversion narrative, and chronicle – and range in terms of audience – from lower-middle class to upper-class gentry – I am led to them in their explicit response to the identity anxieties that mark the period as well as their insistence usually explicit, on somatic surfaces as the terrain at issue, materializing multiple identifications, movable and porous, in their various circulations. Bodies do strange things in these stories (or people do strange things to them): they are revealed and partitioned, peeled and eaten and projected, diseased and healed, they are formless and multiform. Each of these permutations materializes the identity of the body in question; and, while identities are projected upon these corporeal surfaces, just as

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Postcolonial Middle Ages*, 21; see also Scala and Federico 1-10.

often, the bodies in question, and the identities they manifest, reveal their own limitless trajectories as they exceed, transcend, evade, disrupt any static teleology of identity, both on their own surfaces and across their narrative landscapes in ways that intervene in the specific identity pressures of the period in which they were written.

This proposed corporeal and identitarian hermeneutic is largely absent from the critical history of any of the texts I will examine in this dissertation. Contemporary critics, while acknowledging the centrality of identity politics across their narratives' terrains, have nearly exclusively limited their studies to a teleologically closed and finite understanding of identity. In those interpretive models, skin is a coherent, inscribable surface, bodies manifest transparent signs of an interior nature, and identities cohere across time and space. While these paradigms generally acknowledge the somatic manifestation of identity, and perhaps the conversion across discrete identities and somatic forms, they rarely trace the temporary, mutable, perhaps even infinite multiplicity of both medieval narrative bodies and the identities they materialize. Tellingly, these readings of identities have not always proved satisfactory even to the critics who propose them (I'm thinking particularly of the critical histories of the *Siege of Jerusalem*). I believe that this analysis of open and movable identities will open new avenues of reading both bodies and identities in late medieval English narrative, readings that take into account the particular pressures upon racial/religious and class identifications both particular to the late fourteenth century and resonant with contemporary understandings of embodied selfhood.

Ultimately, beyond the critical receptions of the particular texts I will discuss, I anticipate that this extended study will contribute to the larger conversation about identitarian politics by providing clear examples of the impossibility of totalizing any identity and the consequent importance of corporeal surfaces as sites of temporary identity materialization, and will provide evidence that these postures towards identity

have always already been in circulation, as these late fourteen-century texts testify. To that end, I hope to provide a new kind of corporeal hermeneutic by which to trace and make meaning of the various trajectories of bodies – what happens to them, where they go, what they produce, what readers gain by attending to the narrative appearance and circulation of bodies. What does it mean to be a body, to have a body, in a landscape in which many identities accumulate upon its porous surface?

I have written earlier that I intend this study to open up new and productive ways of imagining possibilities for being in the Middle Ages. More than simply mobile, I think I would like to argue that medieval identity is best understood as communal, as what Nancy terms Being-with, in an essential plural that is also essentially active. Most fully alive, fully present in and across the corporeal ruptures that allow this selfhood to slip its bounds and flow, this idea of selfhood is perhaps best understood as transitive verb, as reverberation with or touch of an Other; while resonant with contemporary thought, this figure of embodied being is very much a medieval notion, and seems to hover along the periphery of the narratives I examine as they wrestle with their own identitarian pressures.

### **Identifications in/as Circulations**

So, what can be meant by identity? Both medieval and contemporary discussions inform the underlying assumptions about identity and identification that will drive this study. Identitarian discussions deploy “identity” sometimes to refer to a sense of self-awareness or personality; elsewhere, the term can reference communal affiliation. Identity often implicitly refers to a spatiotemporal continuity, implying a static “I” that exists from one moment to the next (perhaps regardless of form).<sup>14</sup> Bynum discusses these semantic ranges of “identity” in her work on medieval metamorphosing bodies. She argues that, while narratives of metamorphosis are

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<sup>14</sup> See Bynum 163.

prolific, especially during her focus period, the twelfth century, these narratives of change, either via hybridity or metamorphosis, finally “insist on identity,” by which she means I think a kind of unified, static interiority, a sense of self that remains while the body is transformed.<sup>15</sup> This insistence on static identity in works of Western high culture, Bynum suggests, constitutes or provides an example of Western individualism. While I appreciate Bynum’s discussion of metamorphosis, especially as she traces the philosophical and theological importance of transformation in classical and medieval sources, I maintain that there is, in the late fourteenth century narratives I will examine, much more freedom for identity mobility than Bynum allows. I would like to press upon this usual insistence upon identity’s coherence across time and space as its primary property arguing instead for identity as a kind of relationality, a triangulation of self-knowledge, communal affiliations and corporeal performances or circulations that produce a movable sense of self across time; a kind of identity bricolage in which each sense of identity is implicated in the other.<sup>16</sup> Instead of, or beyond, the idea that identity is dependent upon place, time, and social context – upon temporal continuity, or upon any kind of essential quality – my premise is that these identity transactions constitute temporary manifestations, written across the somatic terrain, across surfaces, not depths.

This identity model is certainly indebted to Foucault, whose genealogical project always assumes that there is no essence of either metaphysical concepts or of human identity. As the genealogist goes back, she discovers the essential barrenness

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<sup>15</sup> See especially 32

<sup>16</sup> For the implication of individual identity in communal affiliation, see MacIntyre 172-3, chapters 13-15; see also Aers 2-6. For “collective identity” as a potential internalization, or self-perception, of communal affiliation, see Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity*, 1-10. Reiss argues from classical and early medieval models that human identity cannot be defined or understood distinct from the social (see 19-20; 53); see also Gurevich 89. Rubin views medieval conceptions of identity as a kind of accumulation, rather than replacement, achieved through complex networks of communal affiliation and ritual (see 383-91).

of identity, or that it is cobbled together from “alien forms.”<sup>17</sup> This dissociated self allows for identities to be externalized, traced upon surfaces, not depths. Corporeal circulation frustrates any solitary reading of those somatic planes as well as creating spaces of new identity materializations. The excessive or strange bodies I propose to read manifest their refusal of the static identity they are meant to materialize as well as new identity transactions in their discrete narrative landscapes. That two of the narratives treated in this dissertation are conversion narratives of sorts perhaps resonates with this model of identity as cobbled from alien forms: in these cases, from the alien forms of racial-religious others. This kind of conversation connects with medieval conversion narratives, in which Christian identity comes into being out of alien forms of the other: Jew, Muslim, apostate, outsider. And, as Steven Kruger has deftly articulated, the movement initiated to make a Christian in conversion narratives can also create a contested space in which identity can become nebulous. .

This openness to the destabilization of totalized identity, to the inessential and relational as constitutive of identification has been insightfully articulated from within a few different critical approaches, Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism, for one. Žižek writes of Lacan that he figured the psychoanalytical subject as a pure nonsubstantial subjectivity:

he denotes the subject by a crossed-out S, indicating thereby a constitutive lack of any support that would offer the subject a positive, substantial identity. It is because of this lack of identity, that the concept of *identification* plays such a crucial role in psychoanalytic theory: the subject attempts to fill out its constitutive lack by means of identification.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 142

<sup>18</sup> Žižek 166

I have been especially influenced by the project of queering this Lacanian subjective lack, turning lack into an opportunity for plenitude and connection. David Halperin and Jonathan Goldberg, for example, have iterated a resistance to identity totalizations both as the expansive limits of queer positionality as well as the identities that queer positionality touches, articulating a queer essence that is explicitly not positivist, and constantly shifting in relation to the normative.<sup>19</sup> This queer project, according to Goldberg, inhabits “the realm of the simulacrum...especially insofar as it explains not only the aleatory nature of being but the contours of knowledge and perceptions caused by mobile materializations.”<sup>20</sup> From within a theoretical context that insists upon its inessentialism on the one hand and its expansiveness on the other, queer theorizers of the Middle Ages also helpfully open identities to all excesses, discontinuities, marginalized iterations, or put more positively, all fluid manifestations outside any social norm.<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw perhaps goes farthest in expressing a queer expansiveness of identification across multiple categories of identification and signification. For her, the queer “eliminate[es] any idea of essence, obviates all question of originality, sincerity, even truth...clears out the ground of identity as essential, it renders categorization problematic and puts in question the meaning, if not the very possibility, of such ‘outing’.”<sup>22</sup> This vacated ground, far from being a barren terrain, becomes the field across which productive cominglings, compassionate or desiring transhistorical touching, can take place.

Another way of thinking about identity as mobile and expansive is with Deleuze and Guattari’s image of subjectivity as rhizomatic. Instead of fixed identities connected genealogically to time, space, and teleology, they envision identity as

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<sup>19</sup> Halperin 62

<sup>20</sup> Goldberg 507-8

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Burger’s introduction to *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, in which he argues beyond the limits of fixed identitarian taxonomies to explore, through an explicitly queer lens, “the fullness of identifications that desire can excite” (xi).

<sup>22</sup> 89, 91

comprised of discrete flows, intensities, and fragments – rhizomes – whose free movement allows multiple pathways for connections, for materializations of identities across the surfaces they temporarily create.<sup>23</sup> A rhizomatic identity “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” without a positivist, but with an infinitely conjunctive essence.<sup>24</sup> This essentially multiple plane of identification is a territory shot through with rupture, fracture, and with movement as constitutive of its territory-ness.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the rupture and fragmentation inherent to temporary materializations of identity – the constantly shifting nature of identity – does not negate identity as substantial; that is, movable identity does not cease to be identity, but movable identity does cease to be oppositional and positivistic. While for Deleuze and Guattari, the constant shifts and flights of identity remove the possibility, or perhaps even the desirability, to accede to the real, they do say that this continuous identitarian variation is the oscillatory movement that brings forth any concept of identity, even a virtual identity, making identity “a means of exploration...mak[ing] it a veritable production.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, what Deleuze and Guattari provide is a picture of identity in/as its circulations across multiple plains of meaning. They provide a useful space in which multiplicities of identifications and connections, temporarily real in their circulations, provide useful, momentary sites of meaning. In this model, identity is supple, identity boundaries are realized only in and as their transgressions, identity itself becomes a kind of threshold.<sup>27</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy has also articulated a theology of selfhood that informs this project as he writes on the plural, circulating, and fractured essence of being.

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<sup>23</sup> See also Grosz, “A Thousand Tiny Sexes,” for a feminist critique of this position.

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 25

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 55

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 110, 160. For being as fractal, inter-dimensional, and coherent only in temporary suspensions of its becoming movement, see also Massumi 22.

<sup>27</sup> See Massumi 55. See also Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” for a further discussion of the productivity of crossing limits.

According to Nancy, the meaning of being (human) is meaning – in the sense that humans are the plane upon which “significations can be produced and circulate.”<sup>28</sup> To facilitate Nancy’s discovery of what it means to be human, he maintains that everything pertaining to human must be vacated, undone, disconnected from a “specifiable horizon” in order to recapture a meaning of human that is in itself undone, fractured, mobile, or the opening of that horizon. Human selfhood is that opening, that infinity, bound by no fixed enclosure.<sup>29</sup> This model of what it means to be human is beyond any “brute givenness” or pure presence of being. Instead, Nancy’s conception understands being as circulation, not state or quality but action. That is, the essence of being is being between, circulating across, and “we” – each individual materialization of being – embody this circulation.<sup>30</sup> It is less important to understand being-with than to pay attention to the modes of its materialization. And attending to that materialization reveals that “Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself *as such*” and this presence is originally divided, disjointed.<sup>31</sup> What is exposed in this coming apart is “‘us’ as web or network,” or being as being-with, what he calls the singular-plural of being that is the manifestation of being’s essential fractured circulations. He writes, “the singular-plural constitutes the essence of Being, a constitution that undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself.”<sup>32</sup>

What interests me here, and what I want to build the following analysis upon, is the movement, even the oscillation, the displacements and deployments that this being-with requires. This model of selfhood insists upon interrelationship of identities in order to *be* identities. Like language, which must continue to change across time in

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular-Plural*, 2

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* xi, xii

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* 2, 12

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* 2-3

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* 28-9

order to retain its vitality, identity's trajectory of disintegration and reintegration is its essence and essential to its vitality. The embodied identities in the following chapters also evince a selfhood that is "always and indefinitely" in the process of being completed, putting identity "essence itself in the hyphenation – 'being-singular-plural'," which is a mark of union and separation both.<sup>33</sup> Derrida maintains of textual identities that their essential truth "is never given in itself" but rather is becoming, opening, change, rewriting. "The past," he writes, "is never exhausted in its virtualities, insofar as it is always capable of giving rise to *another* reading, another context, another framework that will animate it in different ways." Likewise, this dissertation will attempt to animate embodied identities in a way open to the plenitude made possible by their very fragmentation or openness.

This idea of being as being-with, essentially co-essential, open, active and mobile, circulates its own meaning across time to touch, with resonance, medieval articulations of identity. The assumption that identity can be separated from sociopolitical life and engagement, from materiality and body, is a recent phenomenon, and was not nearly as accommodated in medieval representations, when Reiss argues individual and community were not diametrically opposed, but rather were complicit in each other's coming into being.<sup>34</sup> Galenic medical theory, which pervaded European physiognomy and cosmology until into the nineteenth century, substantially agrees with the picture of identity as open, permeable, and singular-plural offered up by Deleuze, Guattari, and Nancy.<sup>35</sup> Galen's model of humoral personhood, comprised solely of hot, cold, wet, and dry matter, places human identity in a realm of flux, quite literally, as human identity is "animated by the movements of hot and cold, dark and light fluids in changing distributions."<sup>36</sup> Not only the body, Galen's humoral

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 36-7

<sup>34</sup> See Reiss 20-30

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 75. See also Reiss 23 for history of Galen's influence in Europe.

<sup>36</sup> See also Paster 8-9; Rubin 106.

physiognomy essentially materializes the soul itself, envisioning the whole person, interior and exterior, as constituted and bounded by these flows, made and remade in their circulations.<sup>37</sup> Bynum agrees that “...the Galenic person is, in a sense, an entity of multiples – that is the person is a balance of opposing forces or factors more than a new, third thing.”<sup>38</sup> This fluid circulation materializes not only the openness and mutability of human identity, but also humans’ co-essence with all other Being, as there is essentially and materially no difference between the humoral body and soul and the rest of the physical world.<sup>39</sup> Humans interact “constructively” with the rest of nature, sharing as they do the same open and fluid humoral essence.<sup>40</sup> Miri Ruben mobilizes humoral theory to argue that “humours inflected a single humanity, fluid and open to variation.” In this model human identification opens itself to a “dizzying variety of imaginable and observable...forms.”<sup>41</sup>

The language of selfhood articulated within medieval theology offers another related way of thinking about identity as plural, fragmented, and essentially open. In his sermons on the *Song of Songs*, Bernard of Clairvaux famously describes the soul’s mystical union with the divine as a marriage, a touching, of like and unlike, in terms that seem to image humanity as a hybridity, a “both...and” of identity. Bernard describes the self united with God as “an embrace where identity of will makes of two one spirit.”<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, Bernard employs the image of ingestion – radically, the image of God ingesting the faithful (not its Eucharistic reverse) – to show humans’ simultaneous unity with and utter distance from God: “I am ashes and eaten by him...He feeds us and is fed by us in order to unite us more closely to himself. In no other way can we be perfectly united with him...that there may be firm union and full

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<sup>37</sup> See Galen’s *Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* ¶.2.20-38: 1.301-3; see also Reiss 214-15.

<sup>38</sup> Bynum 144

<sup>39</sup> Reiss 220

<sup>40</sup> Galen, *Therapeutic Method*, 1.2.10-11; Reiss 216

<sup>41</sup> Rubin 106

<sup>42</sup> 83.I.3

combination, since I am in him and he will be totally in me.”<sup>43</sup> This image of mutual eating resonates with Nancy’s singular-plural being, the essence of which is *in* the other, or in the productive space between self and other, in which rupture touch – the moment of unity and diversity, utter proximity and irreconcilable distance – can happen. Bernard, too, seems constantly to be playing in that fruitful space of self-rupture, in which fragmentation is the movement of plenitude and becoming(-divine). Bynum agrees in her analysis of what she calls Bernard’s “theological anthropology” when she writes: “Bernard’s language describes not how something changes, what constitutes an entity, how identity perdures; it simply affirms at every ontological level a simultaneity of opposites in which what is exists as A and not-A, one plus one, in conversation with – and being – itself.”<sup>44</sup> Identity here is figured as *unitas* and *diversitas*, an oscillation in which longing and return constitute human essence.

I propose to read the movements, the circulations of corporeal exteriors to trace the trajectories of identifications that manifest on those surfaces. I would like to propose a much more volatile, shifting idea of identity, identities that evade any single iteration of their limits, identities unable to be captured in any taxonomy, constantly overflowing their boundaries in limitless trajectories of coming-into and out-of being. In this dissertation, I will pursue a line of inquiry that examines what can be gained by a theory of identity as essentially insubstantial, and primarily in-substance. That is, I would like to exteriorize identity, and trace its coming into and out of being on the surfaces of bodies. This kind of study would attend to the circulation of bodies – what they do, how they come together and break apart, their trajectories across narrative terrains, their own projections and exteriorizations – as non-integral, non-teleological sites of identity materializations. But these identity materializations would be as

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<sup>43</sup> 71.II.5

<sup>44</sup> Bynum 162

temporary and movable, as excessive and multiple, as the bodies which manifest them, making strange any totalized identity. Another way of putting the corporeal hermeneutic I propose is to read the body, following a connection proposed by Gail Weiss, as a kind of “discordant concordance,” as a site revealing the multiple trajectories of identifications across many potential states while also frustrating any attempt at unified, coherent identity.

### **Excessive Somatic Surfaces**

In particular, I am interested in corporeal surfaces – skin, flesh, bodily exteriorizations or projections – as the terrain, the plane across which that spectacle of truth materializes. My emphasis on surfaces, as opposed to depths, is influenced in part by psychoanalysis, particularly the concept of the ego as an embodied manifestation. Freud maintains that the ego is “a mental projection of the surface of the body.”<sup>45</sup> For both Freud and Lacan, the visual image of bodies – both self’s and others’ – produces the ego.<sup>46</sup> The body’s skin, then, encloses both the viscera and any sense of self, both the sense of self known to the self and to the other. According to Anzieu, this corporeal ego functions as “a containing, unifying envelope for the self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible.”<sup>47</sup> This concept of body as the sac, screen, or sieve for the self certainly does not originate with contemporary psychoanalysis; Bynum writes from twelfth century sources that identity – “labile, problematic, threatening, and threatened” – is written on the surface of the body as “the body carries the story.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See also Grosz *Space Time and Perversion* 85; Cohen, William 73.

<sup>46</sup> On embodiment of ego, see especially Cohen, William “Deep Skin”; Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*; Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*; and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, chapter 2.

<sup>47</sup> William Cohen 73

<sup>48</sup> 182, 178. However, Bynum’s stories of metamorphosis propose to guarantee identity stability while they trace somatic shifts, while I don’t feel the need to guarantee such stability across times or bodies.

The narratives I analyze below assume a similar kind of identification across corporeal surfaces, in which model “the moment of ‘exteriority’ ...[is] of almost essential value.”<sup>49</sup> My focus will be almost exclusively on these somatic surfaces, as opposed to depths, because surfaces are the terrain across which the identity of the Other materializes and touches the “me” of the reader to communicate identity. The flesh is what is “left to hold onto”; it is that with which we make a connection across time. Ultimately, my focus on surface resists or frustrates a kind of static interpretation of identity and insists on the movability, circulation, possibility of rupture, exchange, flow, permeability of the identifications that ride on those surfaces. As I write below, identity, like blood, flows across these opened and mutable surfaces. Or, as Denise Riley writes of identification upon the superficial, instead of occupying one identity fully – leading to what she calls the “extraordinary weight of characterization” – one will rather “skate across the several identities which will take your weight, relying on the most useful for your purpose at the moment.”<sup>50</sup> The identities in the stories that follow do, indeed, glide across the surface of the bodies that materialize them.

The bodies to which I am drawn in the stories of this discussion are particularly those bodies which transgress in some way their corporeal and identitarian limits: what I am calling excessive or eccentric bodies. Eccentric bodies provide stark moments - of both corporeal and identitarian materialization - as the narratives that present them seem to foreground their strange surfaces as perhaps *the* terrain at stake in the text’s process of meaningful production. This eccentric transgression of corporeal limits – even the limits of what it means to have an embodied self at all – can be positive and productive of new kinds of identifications; these eccentric bodies

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy 30

<sup>50</sup> Riley 16

can function as sites of identity production. Transgression and limit are mutually implicated, are contingent upon each other for being, like a spiral. According to Foucault,

Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being... It forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time, to experience its positive truth in its downward fall... Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of viewing the transgression of corporeal and identity limits as a zone of negation or lack, I would like to explore the plenitude, the space of affirmation, that is opened when the limits of embodied identity are transgressed. If, according to MacKendrick, ruptured bodies provide open spaces for “infinite possibilities of life...as meaning breaks its limits,”<sup>52</sup> I would like to explore in this study how medieval fabulous narratives unfold that infinite life, that affirmation of multiple being, across corporeal limits.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, I affirm the relational – both resistant and transactional – as *the* component of identity, a relationality triangulated infinitely, across bodies and their transgressed limits.

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault 34-35

<sup>52</sup> MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, 129

<sup>53</sup> See also Rubin 113

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## CHAPTER 2

### “Wipouten Blod & Bon”: Fleshing out *The King of Tars*

“The body presents opportunities for identity-making which contained a wide range of possibilities and forms” (Rubin, “The Person in the Form,” 110).

“...between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship...This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible...if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part” (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133).

“Surface isn’t opposed to depth (from which one resurfaces) but to interpretations. Foucault’s method was always opposed to any interpretative method. Never interpret; experience, experiment” (Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 87).

I begin this discussion of somatic surfaces and the identities they embody – of the identities made and unmade across the terrain of the flesh – by turning to a romance vision of arguably the most eccentric of medieval narrative bodies: the flesh ball child in *the King of Tars*. While it may seem a stretch to begin with such an extreme example of flesh – what could such a strange body have to reveal about “normal” bodies in narrative, in the flesh? – I begin here for two reasons. Helpfully, in terms arranged by chrono-logos, the *King of Tars* comes first of the stories I will examine: the story is drawn from the specter of historical events that most likely took place around 1299, and the Middle English version was first composed shortly before 1330. And so, this story’s depiction of bodies and the way they materialize

identity provides a snapshot of what's happening in England, in the English imaginary, at the opening of the century in question in this study.

Beyond chronology, the *King of Tars* provides a starting point for this discussion of embodied identity by virtue of its anomalous fleshy forms, in particular, the child born as a lump of flesh. Far from existing outside the realms of normative identities, this strange flesh exists at their center, at/as the origin of the narrative's identifications, providing a moment of eccentricity that magnifies and makes visible the modes of normative racial-religious identity constructions – in this text, white and Christian identities – at work in the rest of the narratives I examine. Like the monstrous medieval body, which Jeffrey Cohen has argued serves to reveal religious and racial identities as nexuses of conflicted discourses rather than static and *a-priori* categories, the *King of Tars*' formless flesh (which some have called monstrous) reveals racial-religious identities as constructed and maintained via tantalizing interminglings written across the somatic terrain.<sup>54</sup> As its etymology testifies, this monster, if it can be called monster, *monstrat*: it warns, magnifies, reveals, demonstrates.<sup>55</sup> While MacKendrick maintains that the eccentric or the extreme “magnifies and so makes more visible the ‘normal’,” I am more interested in Mark Webb's claim, later also cited by MacKendrick, that “Hyperbole does not emphasize and magnify; it conjures and reveals.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, even more than magnifying dominant

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<sup>54</sup> For medieval identities, particularly Christian identity, as a “nexus of conflicted discourses,” see Cohen's introduction, “Midcolonial,” in *Postcolonial Middle Ages* (see especially pages 6-7). See also MacKendrick 108. I follow Heng in her usage of the term *racial-religious* to indicate that medieval conceptions of race were inextricably linked to religious identifications and that both operate as a single, indivisible discourse (see especially *Empire of Magic* 234). In addition to Heng's *Empire of Magic* and Cohen's *Postcolonial Middle Ages*, other important works contributing to the discussion about premodern racial representations include Kruger's “Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories”; Lampert's “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages”; and the special edition on race in *the Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, edited by Thomas Hahn. See also John Block Friedman's *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*.

<sup>55</sup> See Cohen, “Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands,” who links *monstrare* with its linguistic roots in *monere/monstrare/demonstrare* (85).

<sup>56</sup> MacKendrick 51; Webb 23

racial-religious identity, I am interested to trace the ways that this eccentric flesh *conjures* the narrative's dominant identifications, calls them into being, and reveals the mechanisms by which its normative racial-religious identities hold together, and fall apart.

I'd like to take the flesh ball in the *King of Tars* – and the fleshy surface of the romance as a whole – as a kind of test case of corporeal ontology – what it means to have flesh, to encounter the flesh of the other, of the self – to trace the identity materializations and dematerializations that are, literally, fleshed out along its featureless and elastic contours. This reading proposes to tease out the hermeneutic, corporeal, and identitarian potentialities mobilized in the instantiation of the flesh child, whose provocative existence, while temporary, ungrounds the bodies and identifications it touches, providing a moment for the potential construction of either Christian or Saracen, male or female, human or animal identities in the narrative. Further, this story unfolds the kinds of permeable communal affiliations in circulation at the opening of the fourteenth century in England and situates this conversation about embodied identification within larger currents of identity contest and conflation in the historico-cultural context of the period.

First, a bit of a narrative recapitulation. The story begins at the court of the Christian king of Tars, whose beautiful daughter agrees to marry the Muslim sultan of Damascus in order to save her people from his repeated attacks. Though the Sultan keenly desires the lady, and brings her to Damascus, he will not marry her until she “leued upon his lay.”<sup>57</sup> She feigns belief, and after an elaborate conversion ceremony, they are married. When she gives birth to a deformed child, described only as a round of insentient and featureless flesh, each partner uses the occasion to test the potency of their respective faiths. While the sultan's gods prove powerless to effect healing, the

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<sup>57</sup> line 407

child is miraculously beautified – not to mention humanized and gendered – upon his Christian baptism, prompting the sultan’s conversion. The narrative concludes with the forced Christianization, or alternate bloody slaughter, of the surrounding Muslim community.

What are we to make of, or to make out of, this strange, featureless ball of flesh? How are we to interpret this ball of flesh that is lovingly circulated across spaces of identification – from the site of interracial, interreligious commingling in the bedroom to Muslim temple to Christian baptismal font and back again – calling into question the separateness of both spaces and racial-religious selves in its materialization alone. This flesh has both repelled and fascinated readers of the story; and attending to the lump child has usually meant reading the contours of this body allegorically, in which context the deformed flesh provides the impetus for the manifestation of the “transforming power” of Christianity to reset the world of the romance in accordance with its underlying hierarchical values.<sup>58</sup> Jane Gilbert argues that the flesh materializes the inability of the Sultan to participate in the symbolic authority granted to the paternal function.<sup>59</sup> More recently, insightful work by Geraldine Heng, Lisa Lampert, and Siobhain Bly Calkin has read the child as a site of anxiety about, a literal incarnation of, the transgression of racial or religious boundaries.<sup>60</sup> The beautification of this flesh, then, serves to reaffirm those racial-religious distinctions along with the futurity of Christianity as dominant identitarian position. Each of these readings begins to unfold the signification of the flesh along one trajectory: flesh as materialization of religion/culture *instructing* biology according to Heng,<sup>61</sup> or according to Calkin, the formless flesh as a kind of cultural

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<sup>58</sup> Perryman 58. All references to the text of the poem are taken from Perryman’s edition.

<sup>59</sup> See “Putting the Pulp into Fiction,” especially pages 105-117.

<sup>60</sup> See Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 227-37; Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-)Middle Ages”; Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, especially pages 97-132. See also, Calkin’s “Marking Religion on the Body.”

<sup>61</sup> Heng 229

intelligibility worst case scenario in which the nightmare fantasy of the monstrous lump figures the inability to differentiate cultural groups unified in marriage and sex.<sup>62</sup> But what I find missing from their analyses is a sustained treatment of the ontology of the flesh and the implications for all embodied identities in the narrative, an investigation of the sense in which contact with the flesh disrupts not only enfleshed Saracen identity, but white Christian identity as well. Finally, though this flesh is anomalous, perhaps monstrous, and the rupture in intelligible bodies it opens must be foreclosed by the end of the narrative, I would also like to spend time unpacking what possibilities for identity making, as well as unmaking, are materialized along the contours of this flesh. The lump child is perhaps grotesque and monstrous, but it also provides the fleshy origin of the rest of the identity positions in the narrative, a space of not purely lack, but also of possibility and making.

### **Histories**

Telling the story of the ontology of bodies and identities as it appears in the *King of Tars* requires first telling the history that the narrative relates, however fantastically. Beyond situating this narrative and its ideologies about embodied identity as speaking from within a particular historical and cultural context, this history elucidates the identity circulations, with their attendant anxieties and potentialities, of the period of the poem's composition, to which the story refers and responds. Reading the historical foundation of the poem reveals that the story was written against a backdrop in which religious and racial affiliations are more complicated and contingent than simple binary oppositions of Christian/heathen or Christian/Saracen.

The Middle English poem is taken from a popular story that appeared in several chronicles written at the turn of the fourteenth century, and there are at least

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<sup>62</sup> Calkin 115

six analogues to the events as they appear in the *King of Tars*. Analogues include: the entry for the year 1299 in the Anglo-Latin *Flores Historiarum*, written 1300-1307; *Istorie Fiorentine*, a chronicle written 1307-30 in Italian; Rishanger's *Chronica*, written 1307-27 in Anglo-Latin; a letter to Jayme II of Aragon written 1300-1307 in Hispano-Latin; the *Annales Sancti Rudberti Salisburgenses*, a chronicle written 1280-1300 in Germano-Latin; and Ottokar's *Österreichische Reimchronik*, written 1306-8 in German.<sup>63</sup> In all but one analogue, the father is the King of Tars and the mother is the daughter of the Christian king of Armenia. When he converts, he unites with the Christian Armenians to conquer the Sultan of Babylon or of Damascus.<sup>64</sup> The reference to Tars is obscure: *Tars* can refer to *Tartars*, the common medieval name for Mongols, or to *the land of the Tartars*. There is also precedent for *Tars* referring to *Tarsus*, the port in Armenia Minor. Thirdly, some have pointed to the mythical kingdom of *Tharsia* which Mandeville locates roughly in modern Turkestan.<sup>65</sup> However, in all instances *Tars* refers to territories held squarely by Mongols at the time the narrative was written, most likely the first decade of the fourteenth century.

While it may seem surprising to associate this romance tale of miracles and conversions with a Tartar leader, set in the furthest Eastern outreaches of Christendom, Hornstein calls that conflation "inevitable." The Mongols were on the minds of the Christian west increasingly throughout the thirteenth century, first as a westward expanding military and political threat, and then as a promising opportunity. During the last quarter of the thirteenth century especially, "intercourse developed, embassies were exchanged" in an attempt to convert the Mongols and retrain their fearful fighting power against the Muslims, potentially reviving the Christian west's

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<sup>63</sup> See Perryman 42-5 for a synopsis of each analogue and discussion of the Middle English poem's historical connections. Hornstein (in *Historical and Folklore Sources*, "Historical Background," and "New Analogues") and Krause provide complete texts of each source.

<sup>64</sup> Hornstein 405-6. This historical overview is indebted primarily to Hornstein's detailed work.

<sup>65</sup> See Perryman 47-8 for a discussion of precedents for each of these readings of *Tars*.

deflated crusading impetus. Consequently, stories about Mongol conversion began to circulate widely, hopefully around this time. For example, Mangis Khan was reputed to have converted in 1253; Niccolo and Matheo Polo (father and uncle of Marco) reported in 1269 that Kublai Khan requested instruction in the Christian faith. In 1274 Tartar emissaries to the Council of Lyons were baptized; and in 1289, Arghun, a member of the Persian ruling dynasty, reported that one of his sons had converted to Christianity, while Arghun himself also requested baptism.<sup>66</sup>

The particular Mongol leader whose activity most likely provided the historical precedent for the *King of Tars* is Ghazan, Cassanus in the Latin chronicles, born in 1271 to Arghun.<sup>67</sup> It is most likely that Ghazan himself was Muslim: according to his biographer, he officially adopts the turban in 1297. Yet, his ecumenicalism for political and military expediency made him a tantalizing candidate for conversion fantasies, and conversion narratives, in the early fourteenth century. In particular, Ghazan's defeat of the Sultans of Damascus and Babylon in 1299 provided a provocative moment of potential evidence of Christian conversion: he allied with the Christian kings of Armenia and Georgia, he promised to relinquish all captured Palestinian lands to Christians, and in requests for military help from the Christian west, he himself actively promoted rumors that he had or would convert to Christianity.<sup>68</sup> The *Chronicle of Bury St. Edmonds* records the events surrounding 1299:

New joy, new felicity had recently broken upon us from the east. For the great king Ghazan, khan (that is emperor) of the Tartars, made the king of Armenia the chief and leader of his army. Thereupon on the last day of December the first battle was fought against the sultan of Cairo

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<sup>66</sup> Hornstein 406

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* 407-8

<sup>68</sup> *ibid* 409-11

at a place between the two great cities of Gamela and Damascus. There the Saracens were defeated and slain and the sultan fled into the city of Gamela. The leader of the Tartars with the whole of his army pursued him and besieged and captured the said city. The sultan, therefore, fled to Damascus, where at first thousands of Saracens on both sides fell, but at length all the sultan's forces were routed. The sultan himself with only five companions, fled through the wilderness of Cairo to Algar. After this the sultan sent thirty horses laden with gold to the Emperor Ghazan and announced that he wished to hold all his territories from him. Ghazan kept the gold but gave the ambassadors no reply at all, asserting that the treasure he had received was his own and not another's. And lo! when the enemies of the Christians had thus been brought to naught and destroyed, the great khan restored to the Christians all the lands which in former times they possessed.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, the Latin chronicles of the period uniformly attribute Ghazan's success against Babylon/Damascus to his conversion to Christianity. On the other hand, Ghazan himself elsewhere maintained that his motivation for attacking Damascus stemmed not from their being Muslim, but from their being not Muslim enough: according to him, the Damascus Egyptians were drinking wine in mosques during Ramadan.<sup>70</sup>

The possibility of Ghazan's conversion at the Eastern limits of Christendom was psychologically important for the Christian west, coming as it did after the fall of Acre in 1291 and the subsequent loss of Jerusalem, seeming to signal the end of a Christian presence in the Levant. Ghazan's glorious success in 1299 against the

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<sup>69</sup> *Chronicle of Bury St. Edmonds* 154-5

<sup>70</sup> Hornstein 408-9

Muslim Egyptians in Damascus, his tolerance of Christians and alliance with the most important Christian rulers of the East, tantalizing promises both to convert and to continue to collaborate with the Christian west to drive the Egyptians out of Palestine altogether, contributed to a renewed crusading zeal propelling the West into the fourteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Boniface VIII calls for a crusade the next year, having received Ghazan's emissaries with their requests for western aid. It is these emissaries who most likely circulated the stories of Ghazan's conversion and embellished them with their attendant miracles; these emissaries arrive at Canterbury in June, 1300, again in 1303, and are in Europe uninterruptedly until 1307.<sup>72</sup> The *King of Tars* first appears in manuscript in 1330, most likely based on the stories of conversion and miracles disseminated by Ghazan to prompt alliance with the west.

The figure of Ghazan provides a telling starting point for this discussion of racial-religious identities in the Middle English story, a context in which religious affiliation is a matter of political expediency, established and maintained via embellished narrative, and in which racial cominglings across racial-religious lines offer the tantalizing promise of aggrandizement to both Christian and non-Christian groups. Ghazan seems to occupy a space in between religious alliances, at least publicly, in which his affiliations are not quite legible. Further, he himself raises the specter of interfaith, interreligious unions both domestic and sexual (in his rumored marriage to a Christian Armenian princess, as well as the actual offer marriage with the daughter of the Christian emperor Adronicus) as well as military-political. Ghazan's history reiterates the practical expediencies for both sides of working together, as well as the potentially troubling interminglings that expediency required. The anxieties raised by collaborating with a potentially Muslim Ghazan to fight other

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<sup>71</sup> Hornstein 412-13. While he was never married to a Christian princess, as the narrative relates, he did apparently receive an offer of marriage with the daughter of the Christian emperor Andronicus in 1303, but he died before they could be married.

<sup>72</sup> Hornstein 413-14

Muslims in Palestine – troubling for both Christians and Muslims perhaps – are mitigated by narratives of conversion attended by miraculous proofs of authenticity, reframing Ghazan’s illegible religious affiliation and fixing it firmly in *terra Christiana*. For the Christians, promising both mutual faith as well as mutual enemies.

However, stories of conversion always contain within them the specter of the constructed nature of identifications themselves, threaten to pull the dominant identity into the circulation initiated by the initial transformation. As Kruger has argued, conversion experience always opens what he calls queer identity ruptures, “because it explicitly foregrounds the possibility of, as well as limits to, a movement between opposed identity positions and opposed positions of cultural inclusion and exclusion,” providing a “particularly fertile ground” for examining the ways in which identifications come together, fall apart, and the mechanisms via which they maintain their coherence against and across opposed positions.<sup>73</sup> This is the function of conversion across identifications at work in the *King of Tars*. While the Middle English manifestation of this story has changed a few details – it is now the Sultan of Damascus, not the King of Tars, who converts in the presence of the miraculous flesh – the *King of Tars* surfaces the anxieties and potentialities along the fault lines of interracial, interreligious union that was also happening around the turn of the fourteenth century as Christians negotiated their racial-religious affiliations along their geographic and theological edges.

### **Binary Colors**

I suggest that this history upon which the *King of Tars* is based provides a useful lens through which to examine embodied identification in the narrative, telling the tantalizing story of racial-religious commingling and identification that is either

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<sup>73</sup> Kruger 162

indeterminate or at least open to multiple narratives of religious being. It is along the thresholds of that openness where the *King of Tars* unfolds. However, that open space would seem at first glance to be resisted in the narrative's insistence upon clear distinctions between Christian and Saracen bodies, Christian and Saracen selves; at least many critics read the poem that way. It is true that racial markers, as coded on skin color, are foregrounded as perhaps the defining boundary – or one of two boundaries, along with creed – between the two communities from the beginning of the romance. The maiden is repeatedly figured as fair, pure, with “white swere [neck]” and explicitly “as white as feper of swan.”<sup>74</sup> Beyond a mere convention of beauty, the princess' whiteness can be read to function, as Bruce Holsinger has argued elsewhere, as the “color of salvation.”<sup>75</sup> Her salvific function manifests as well in her markedly measured, reasoned discourse. Though her father is filled with disgust and wrath at the thought of intermarriage, the princess herself responds “wiþ mild mod,” and later convinces her parents to assent to the union, for the sake of their people with reasoned argument: “þus þe maiden wiþ wordes stille/ Brou3t hem boþe in better wille/ Wiþ resound ri3t & euen.” Additionally, her lengthy exposition of the gospel is a model of systematic, reasoned discourse of which even her parents seem incapable.<sup>76</sup> Alongside her whiteness, rationality, and self-sacrifice for the cohesion of the Christian community, the princess' facilitation of the transformation of both the lump child and the sultan helps her to be read as the white embodiment of both Christian martyrdom and Marian salvation, as she ushers in the redemption literally in-forming the flesh.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> lines 12, 26

<sup>75</sup> See Holsinger 156-86. See also Lampert's discussion of black and white, 401-10.

<sup>76</sup> lines 58; 274-6; 841-76

<sup>77</sup> See Gilbert 111 for connections between the princess and Mary. Gilbert also mentions that bear cubs in medieval bestiaries are said to be born lumps of white flesh which are shaped and animated by the breath and tongue of their mother (104), which connects the princess, mother of another formless lump, to the work of the creator-God as well as the function of the Holy Spirit as animating breath.

Conversely, the sultan is several times imaged as animal-like – most often as “a hound” – and is explicitly “blac & lobely.”<sup>78</sup> In contrast to the princess’ measured discourse, the sultan’s animal-nature manifests in his predisposition to irrationality, as he more than once lapses into violent wrath that brings him to the brink of madness; his men, too, collectively fight as “wilde...& wode” animals, particularly figured as hounds, boars, lions.<sup>79</sup> Because the Saracen was an other living in the geographical origin of Christianity, they often symbolized the blurring of boundaries, for example those separating rational human from irrational animal.<sup>80</sup> There are at least eighteen reiterations of this colored human/animal distinction, in which racial-religious identity is coded upon skin and across human and animal affiliations, throughout the 1200-line text.

Adding to the separation between racial-religious groups is their shared desire to keep their affiliations distinct; and both the Christian and the Muslim communities clearly express anxiety when faced with a cross-religious union. The narrator maintains: “Wel loPe war a Cristen man/ To wedde an heþen woman/ Þat leued on fals lawe;/ Als loþ was Þat soudan/ To wed a Cristen woman.”<sup>81</sup> Here the sultan sounds more like an historical Christian in his refusal of interfaith conjugal contact. Christian law was stringent in its condemnation of marriage and sexual commingling with Jews and Muslims. For example, the Council of Nablus condemned marriage between Christians and Muslims in 1120, and in his *Decretum* of the 1140’s, Gratian reinforced the prohibition of interfaith sex.<sup>82</sup> Of course, the Fourth Lateran Council

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<sup>78</sup> line 928

<sup>79</sup> lines 38, 98-108, 171, 182, 404, 570, 649-60, 1097, 1176, 1178-82

<sup>80</sup> See Cohen, *Identity Machines*, 202. For more on Saracens in the medieval imaginary, see Kruger, “Conversion and Medieval Categories”; Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*; Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*; and Daniel, *Islam and the West*.

<sup>81</sup> lines 409-13. [“Well loathe was a Christian man to wed a heathen woman who believed a false law; just as loathe was that sultan to wed a Christian woman.” Translation mine.]

<sup>82</sup> See Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Socceity in Medieval Europe*, especially pages 196, 207, 238. Kruger also includes an extensive bibliography on Christian injunctions against interfaith marriage (see page 178 n.32).

famously codified the outward appearance of racial-religious others – particularly Jews and Muslims – precisely, in part, to facilitate the avoidance of inter-faith sexual union with those people groups whose bodies were presumably too difficult to distinguish otherwise from Christians’:

Whereas in certain provinces of the Church the difference in their clothes sets the Jews and Saracens apart from the Christians, in certain other lands there has arisen such confusion that no differences are noticeable. Thus it sometimes happens that by mistake Christians have intercourse with Jewish or Saracen women, and Jews or Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, lest these people, under the cover of an error, find an excuse for the grave sin of such intercourse, we decree that these people (Jews and Saracens) of either sex, and in all Christian lands, and at all times, shall easily be distinguishable from the rest of the populations by the quality of their clothes; especially since such legislation is imposed upon them also by Moses.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to this reluctance towards interfaith union, Muslim law tended to be more lenient towards relations with “people of the book,” that is, Jews and Christians.<sup>84</sup>

While the sultan desires the princess and kisses her, he will not have sex with her; he won’t create a space between them, won’t risk the indeterminate production of something between. It is just that space of intermingling that the sultan is loathe to approach; indeed, the medieval romance tradition itself is also loathe to broach the representation of interreligious union. As Calkin notes, alongside the *King of Tars*, only Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* depicts interreligious sexual union that is not mitigated by prior conversion.<sup>85</sup> So, one can certainly argue, as Calkin does

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<sup>83</sup> Grazel 308

<sup>84</sup> See Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 64, 129-30; and Kruger 167-8. On Muslim attitudes towards intermarriage with Jews and Christians, see Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 133.

<sup>85</sup> See Calkin 247 n.65

convincingly, that the flesh ball child materializes just at the nexus of –what the text calls – this loathing, the anxiety produced at crossing these clearly articulated racial and religious, even human/animal, boundaries.

The most graphic presentation of these embodied racial-religious distinctions comes as the princess spends her first night at the Sultan’s palace. Alone and contemplating the Sultan’s demand that she convert to Islam, the princess has an extended dream in which she is threatened by enraged black dogs and encouraged by a white, Christ-like knight:

& als sche fel on slepe þore  
Her þou3t þer stode hir bifore  
An hundred houndes blake,  
& bark on hir, lasse & more.  
& on þer was þat greued hir sore,  
Oway þat wald hir take;  
& sche no durst him nou3t smite  
For drede þat he wald hir bite,  
Swiche maistri he gan to make...  
& afterward þer com an hounde  
Wiþ browes brod & hore;  
Almost he hadde hir drawen adoun,  
Ac þurth Ihesus Cristes passioun  
Sche was ysaued þore.  
3ete hir þou3t, wiþouten lesing,  
Als sche lay in hir sweuening,  
Pat selcouþe was to rede,  
Pat blac hounde hir was folweing

Purth mi3t of Ihesu, heuen king,  
 Spac to hir in manhede,  
 In white cloþes, als a kni3t,  
 & seyð to hir, “Mi swete wi3t,  
 No þarf þe noþing drede  
 Of Teruagaunt no of Mahoun.  
 Ði lord þat suffred passioun  
 Schal help þe at þi nede.<sup>86</sup>

This dream is worth analysis, because it previews the story to follow in literal black and white, human and animal pastiche. The dream emphasizes the chasm of difference between the Saracen community and the Christian princess, differences in skin, of form, and of nature, all emanating from religious affiliation. This stark differentiation and rearticulation of identity boundaries in black skin and animal form perhaps responds to those boundaries’ transgression at this point in the story: the dream comes as the princess has physically crossed into Saracen space and contemplates further joining the community with her profession of faith and with intimate access to her body. Divesting her of any culpability for crossing this racial-religious threshold, the dream must divest the princess of agency; she is the passive recipient of first the violent, and then sexual, Saracen aggression, as well as the Christ-knight’s salvific action.

The dream’s figuration of the black, dog-like Saracen body both represents and

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<sup>86</sup> ll 421-9, 440-56. [And as she fell asleep at last/ She thought there stood before her/ A hundred black hounds,/ and [they] barked at her, less and more./ And there was one that troubled her sorely./ That wanted to take her away;/ And she dared not smite him/ For fear that he would bite her./ Such mastery he began to take/...And afterward there came a hound/ With black and hoary brows;/ He had almost drawn her down,/ But through Jesus Christ’s passion/ She was saved at last./ Yet she thought, without falsehood,/ As she lay in her dreaming,/ That was marvelous to perceive,/ That black hound [who] was following her/ Through the might of Jesus, heaven’s king,/ Spoke to her in manhood,/ In white clothes, As a knight./ And said to her, “My sweet woman,/ You have no need to fear anything/ From Teruagaunt nor from Mahoun./ Your lord that suffered his passion/ Shall help you in your need.”]

blurs the typical medieval fantasy of the Saracen, who are often depicted as sexually deviant or physically excessive. For example, in Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora*, Mohammad is depicted with a banner reading *Poligamus esto*, "I proclaim polygamy."<sup>87</sup> According to Alain de Lille, Saracen bodies are too sensual and too aggressive; in his *Contra paganos*, he declares Islam "an abominable sect, one suitable for fleshly indulgences."<sup>88</sup> That abomination is often figured in a bestial connection to animal form, to dogs or swine. A striking example of this excessive corporeal and bestial connection is found in Guibert of Nogent's assertion that Mohammad was both epileptic and died by being dismembered and devoured by a herd of pigs during an epileptic seizure.<sup>89</sup> That grounding in bestial flesh is certainly evident in the dream, in which wild dogs are intent on dragging the princess to the ground, in an animal-like frenzy of sexual conquest. Yet, as Cohen notes of medieval representations of Saracens, "Like all monsters, racist representations inevitably conjoin desire and disgust."<sup>90</sup> The threat of Saracen attack in the dream also brings their excessive bodies tantalizingly close to Christians'. In that sense, the princess' dream is squarely within the representational line of other medieval texts which figure and mitigate the temptation/threat of the Saracen. In this case, the racial-religious threshold crossing is negotiated, its boundaries reinforced, by both rearticulating the stark differences between Christian and Saracen while also promising that those differences will be subsumed in conversion. The later conversion of the Sultan, with its attendant and dramatic skin color change from black to white, actualizes the dreamed transformation.

While this dream serves as a potent presentation of embodied racial-religious

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<sup>87</sup> See Lewis 211. See also Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment," for other bestial and excessive corporeal configurations popular in the medieval imaginary of Saracens that "conjoin desire and disgust" (200).

<sup>88</sup> See Uebel 274

<sup>89</sup> *Gesta Dei* 128-30. Kruger's discussion of this scene and other fabrications as part of the medieval fantasy of Saracen race, religion, and sexuality is instructive (see pages 160-61).

<sup>90</sup> Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 200.

distinctions, as well as the fear associated with transgressing those distinctions, it also opens moments that hint at the identity ambiguity that also figures later in the story, precisely at the point of fleshy contact between the Sultan and the princess. In her dream, the white, Christ-like knight who promises protection to her is literally transformed from the black hound “wip browes brod & hore” who has nearly “drawen hir adoun.” The hound’s sexual attack turns to loving promise, as the white knight promises his “swete wi3t” that she has nothing to fear. While most readers read the dream sequence as illustrative of the racial-religious color coding the text articulates, the extent of the transformation itself is vague. It is unclear whether the hound turns into a man or only approaches “manhede” by virtue of his ability to speak; whether his skin is whitened or whether his clothing alone is white upon his still-black skin. But as an image potentially foreshadowing the sultan’s conversion, this black hound/white Christ image illustrates the ambiguity of these spaces of contact, highlighting the ambiguities that attend conversion from one racial-religious state to another.

MacKendrick makes the argument that we approach the impossibility of articulation where our embodied selves are most intimately, even excessively involved, spaces in which “we may well be rendered inarticulate, broken by the inadequacy of our words in the face of what must surely exceed their – and our – grasp.”<sup>91</sup> The text itself seems to reflect this impossibility of eloquence at the moment of dreamed transformation. The narrator inserts a series of disjointed phrases – “3ete hir pou3t, wipouten lesing,/ Als sche lay in hir sweuening,/ þat selcouþe was to rede...þurth mi3t of Ihesu, heuen king” – that distances the knight in white from the black hound he was a few lines earlier, enlarging the distance by placing the power of the divine – the “mi3t of Ihesu” – in the space between. The princess’ waking response to the dream furthers the ambiguity of the moment: she trembles “for loue of

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<sup>91</sup> MacKendrick 105

her sweening,” and readers have difficulty interpreting that love-trembling. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as fear of the physical or sexual threat figured in the dream. However, her quaking along with its linked rhyme word – naked - suggests as well the princess’ erotic response to the dream, to the hound-turned-knight, or to some moment in between.

The simultaneous temptation and threat of the Saracen body is perhaps enacted in the scene following the dream, in which the princess herself approaches illegibility of identification, like the sultan of the narrative, and like the Ghazan of the chronicles. Reassured and emboldened, perhaps tantalized, by her naked dream, the princess emerges from her bed to be clothed in the garb of a Muslim woman and subsequently begins the lengthy process of converting to Islam. Clothed as a Saracen wife, this new appearance its own moment of “cultural disorientation,”<sup>92</sup> she enters the temple, publicly confessing that she will “Mahoun...me take,/ & Ihesu Crist, mi Lord, forsake,/ þat made Adam & Eue.”<sup>93</sup> The text details how she kisses the statue of each Saracen god, how she learns the Saracen creed by heart and proclaims it “openliche wiþ hir mouþe.”<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, it is specifically the God of making, the God with the power of coming-into-being, that the princess disavows in her turn to Islam; her conversion reappropriates her whole being, explicitly both mind and body, interior and exterior, to Islam. This conversion, though feigned, is much longer and more detailed in practice than is the Sultan’s conversion to Christianity and is unique in any of the analogues of the *King of Tars*;<sup>95</sup> and if it weren’t for the narrator’s insistence upon her interior Christ-belief, readers would be hard pressed to distinguish her feigned

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<sup>92</sup> Gilbert 117

<sup>93</sup> lines 487-9

<sup>94</sup> lines 493-506

<sup>95</sup> see Hornstein, “Trivet’s Constance,” 355-6; see also Heng’s discussion of the implications of the feigned conversion as a proof text of the normativity of whiteness and the white racial body (234-6). While I disagree that the white racial body remains un-disrupted throughout the narrative, her analysis of the feigned conversion informs my own understanding of the potential for racial-religious illegibility or/via proximity the moment opens.

conversion from an authentic one. Though nominally false, the conversion moment opens a space of troubling instability of identification, in which the text's markers of racial-religious identity – clothing, belief, practice, profession, location – are all transgressed in the person of the princess.

Thus, while it is certainly true that the *King of Tars* plays at the threshold of a racial-religious divide that is coded in black and white, in animal and human traits that the text is loathe, like the Sultan and the Christian king both, to commingle, I will also argue that there is more happening in this poem. Alongside that identitarian divide, I maintain that the poem presents identity as written on skin as profoundly changeable. That is, identities themselves are confounded and movable as they manifest on skin. Most profoundly, Sarracen/Christian identity is confounded in the presence of the ultimate, pure flesh: the flesh ball that cannot be read. While the flesh ball is often interpreted to materialize the anxiety or loathing at the impossible limits of racial-religious commingling, this argument seems to rely exclusively upon an assumption that the narrative supposes the essential naturalness and universality of whiteness and the white racial body in concert with “religious discourse acting as biological determination.”<sup>96</sup> Heng's and Lampert's readings along these lines, in particular, certainly add to our understanding of premodern and contemporary racial-religious identity construction, both in this text and elsewhere. Their studies show that race is interwoven with culture and religion in ways that are more complex than contemporary distinctions of those categories might allow; both make the case that the Middle Ages must be taken into account as informing current discourses, in this case the ideologies of race and racism, in ways beyond nostalgia.

Yet their reading of this particular body, and the normativity it works to reinforce, does not take seriously, in my view, the essential, original identity

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<sup>96</sup> Heng 231-2

instability instantiated by the flesh child, across the flesh of the child, temporary though its existence as formless body is. I would agree that the romance does present the body, the flesh, as the site of essential racial-religious identity, but I would argue that it is the essentiality and stability of *any* racial-religious identity – white as well as black, Christian as well as Muslim - that is disrupted by the birth of the flesh ball. I suggest that the lump child opens a moment in which those modes of being cannot operate as stable categories; all identifications are unmoored, set adrift, however temporarily, when touched by this formless flesh. The flesh ball reveals the processes by which whiteness and Christianity are made to pass as normal, as dominant, by revealing the Christian's moment of constitution, of making. A moment of making in which both Christian and Saracen can potentially emerge from the same somatic origins. In other words, I maintain that this most eccentric of bodies appears in the text both to effect and to materialize the shaking loose of identities from any a priori stasis, figuring them all –Christian as well as Saracen – as contingent and movable, made from the same fleshy origins.

### **Flesh Concealed and Revealed**

As I have argued above, important to understanding the identitarian significance of the flesh child is its narrative context, in which corporeal surfaces – white and black – are displayed repeatedly, definitively, as planes of identification. Of its analogues, the Middle English *Tars* seems more concerned with corporeal surfaces, with skin color and form, as the terrain of this identification. While the *Istorie Fiorentine* records the product of the interracial union as a formless lump of flesh, only the *King of Tars* includes the bit about the skin color change of the Sultan, nor does any other analogue include as many references to skin color and animal associations as racial-religious distinctives.

The text invites readers to read skin in order to discern who is who. The

surface of the skin itself, in form as well as pigment, is presented as a terrain of identification, as the “public spectacle” of identitarian truth. Both the lady and the sultan expose their own naked flesh, and both times naked flesh occupies the place of real racial-religious identity, however temporary its manifestation. The lady’s private, unclothed prayer to Jesus immediately precedes her public and formal (though false) proclamation of faith in Islam:

On hir bed sche sat al naked,  
To Ihesu hir preier sche maked,  
Al mi3tful heuen king:  
As wis as he hir dere bou3t  
Of þat sweuening, in slepe sche þou3t,  
Schuld turn to gode ending.<sup>97</sup>

This naked prayer, exposing the skin presented so many times as white and fair, provokes a reading of her exposed flesh as her real, white Christian essence, about to be clothed in false Muslim garb, as it is both literally and figuratively in the lines immediately following. Placed in between the tantalizing threat of Saracen embrace figured in the dream and her own embrace of Islam in the following lines, this small naked scene reads like the fleshy moment of identity surfacing before going underground, or literally under cover. Further, the text’s insistence that she remains a Christian even when posing as a Muslim recalls this prayer moment, attempts to resurface this exposed flesh as the terrain of real self.

In a similar somatic moment, the sultan offers his own naked flesh later in the narrative, shedding his Muslim clothing in order “To resevue his baptize.”<sup>98</sup> His skin then announces his new Christian identity, when, following his conversion in the next

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<sup>97</sup> lines 460-65 [On her bed she sat all naked, She made her prayer to Jesus the almighty king of heaven that, as certainly as he had redeemed her, concerning that dream which she had dreamt, it should have a favorable outcome.] I follow Perryman in this translation.

<sup>98</sup> lines 923-4

lines, it is transformed from “blac & loþely” to “white...& clere wiþouten blame.”<sup>99</sup> These moments of fleshly proclamation of faith, in addition to the connection of skin color with religious essence, suggest that the flesh is indeed the surface on which identity is materialized in this narrative. Both characters literally reveal their flesh when they are baring their most intimate, most nominally essential racial-religious selves.

However, it is just this stable connection of flesh with essential truth, the normative trajectory of whiteness and Christianity, in addition to Saracen racial-religious identity that the lump child disrupts. This disruption of identity coded on body occurs at the child’s conception, when the lady visibly “chaunged ble,” a somatic shift so striking as to be immediately observed, and rejoiced at, by the sultan: “When it was geten sche chaunged ble;/ Þe soudan himself þat gan se/ Iolif he was & wilde.”<sup>100</sup> In a text that insists upon skin color and its transformation as a sign of spiritual identity, this dermal change is especially loaded. The Middle English Compendium defines “ble” as both “skin color,” “appearance” or “complexion,” and even “character” or “person”; elsewhere within the *King of Tars*’ manuscript context, “ble” is used specifically to refer to a change of skin color. In *Guy of Warwick*, found, like *Tars*, in the Auchinleck manuscript, we learn that Guy, “An vnement purchast he, þat made his visage out of ble.”<sup>101</sup> My point here is that “ble” is used in this manuscript most important to the *King of Tars* in a sense that reinforces this connection of “ble” with a radical change in appearance, extending to skin coloration.

Thus, it seems a reasonable reading that the princess’ coloring changed as a result of her contact with the fleshy child. Yet so many important readings of this

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<sup>99</sup> lines 928, 929-30

<sup>100</sup> lines 568-70

<sup>101</sup> See the Auchinleck MS *Guy of Warwick*, line 6106. The *King of Tars* is witnessed in three manuscripts: Auchinleck (National Library of Scotland Advocates 19.2.1); Vernon (Bodleian Library, English Poetry MS a.1); and Simeon (British Library, Additional MS 22283). Auchinleck is universally taken to be authoritative. See Perryman 9-14.

poem insist on the unchangeability of whiteness in the narrative as the textual sign of the normativity of whiteness and the white racial body. The princess' stable skin color is particularly important to Heng's argument about the construction of the racial body in the narrative, in which race becomes the only stable ground (and the inevitable trumping of Christianity over all other, more transitory, racial signifiers) in a romance where every other terrain is shifting. Where outer practice diverges from inner reality, Heng writes, "Belonging to the right race – as signaled by the biological constancy of the princess' pure white skin – thus guarantees the stability of the princess' religious identity, whatever impositions might follow."<sup>102</sup> I agree with Heng that skin color changes are particularly significant in this narrative, so interested in presenting the somatic surface as the terrain of racial-religious identity, and concerned with those dermal shifts as telling moments of racial-religious conversion; but the stability of white racial identity is exactly what is in question in the princess' somatic mutability. Heng dismisses the princess' change of skin color, with its attendant possibilities of identity shift, in a brief note; and though she acknowledges the "equivocating potential of 'ble,'" she dismisses the moment as referring to the change of her appearance as her belly grows in pregnancy, an argument I find unconvincing. While Heng insists upon the uniformity of the lady's skin color throughout the rest of the romance as an indicator of the supposed normativity of whiteness, that whiteness is literally disrupted here, as the lady's transformation prefigures the sultan's own crossing of the color line at his conversion, during which "chaunged was his hewe."<sup>103</sup>

Further, the princess is not even the only white person to experience a color change in the narrative. Her parents, the king and queen of Tars, also seem to transgress a color line. Grieving at the princess' marriage to the sultan, the text relates

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<sup>102</sup> Heng 235 and 421-2 n.76

<sup>103</sup> line 945

that their “care was euer aliche newe;/ Hem chaunged boþe hide & hewe/ For sorwe & reweli chere.”<sup>104</sup> The “hide & hewe” phrase is important, as it echoes language used specifically about the Saracens’ black skins and animal form throughout the narrative; the sultan’s own conversion also changes his “hide, þat blac & lobely was” to “al white...& clere wiþouten blame.”<sup>105</sup> If the princess’ marriage with the sultan saves the Christians’ from Saracen attack, and her parents agree that she “wilt saue þi moder & me,”<sup>106</sup> this salvation interestingly results in a dermal shift not towards but away from whiteness; the parents’ somatic transformation effects a kind of foreshadowing of the narrative’s other somatic transformations, but in reverse. It brings the leaders of the narrative’s Christian community into representational proximity with the Saracen community.

Why are these moments of dermal transformation important in this discussion of the implications of embodied identity in the presence of the flesh? The princess’ skin change, the first and exclusive somatic manifestation of the flesh child’s coming into being, in effect implicates the lady, once marked as Christian and purely white, in the potential circulation of identities initiated by the transgression of racial-religious boundaries that produces the flesh child. My point is, at the touch of the flesh child (a touch from *within* in this case), the princess’ whiteness and her Christianity seems to be pulled into the mechanism of transformed identities at work throughout the narrative, a movement of identities across racial-religious thresholds that implicates all characters – from the king and queen of Tars to the princess to the sultan – regardless of their relation to normative identity affiliations.<sup>107</sup> Rather than serving to reinforce dominant racial-religious positionings, the flesh child, at least in its inception, in its

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<sup>104</sup> lines 370-72

<sup>105</sup> lines 928-30

<sup>106</sup> line 244

<sup>107</sup> The princess is not the only one to touch the flesh ball. The text relates how the sultan carries the flesh into his gods’ temple, and he carries it out again, rather tenderly “in his hond,” when his gods cannot heal it (624, 664).

formless origins, and in the threshold crossings that produce it, reveals all identity categories to be constructed and movable.

When the child is born, the text describes it this way:

Wel sori wimen were þerfore,  
For lim no hadde it non.  
Bot as a rond of flesche yschore  
In chaumber it lay hem before  
Wipouten blod & bon.  
For sorwe þe leuedi wald dye  
For it hadde noiþer nose no eye,  
Bot lay ded as þe ston.<sup>108</sup>

We might say that the only mark this flesh carries is the mark of ambiguity: gender, racial-religious identification, even humanity are all indeterminate at its birth. Perhaps even more importantly ambiguous is this body's signification: at issue – the question motivating the rest of the romance's action and ultimately left unanswered – is the struggle over how to interpret this body. Does it materialize the Saracen's impotence to reproduce fully, or the consequences of the lady's sacrilegious, even if feigned and forced, conversion? Is the child the *natural* result of unnatural racial-religious union, or, like the husband and wife maintain, is the formless flesh a manifestation of the imperfect faith of one of its parents?

No matter the answer, what is clear is that the flesh child becomes the formless site of these ambiguities, ultimately pointing to the inability, in this romance, of static essential racial or religious identities to reproduce themselves fully. As it lingers between white and black, between Christian and Saracen, man and woman, human and

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<sup>108</sup> lines 579-82, 584-5

animal,<sup>109</sup> the child opens up a space of indeterminacy, of potentiality, as its communities of identification and its signification all hang in suspense. This flesh is “withouten blod and bon”; it exists without – beyond, uncontained by, before – any essentialized identity, insisting upon our attention to its formless somatic surface. This flesh is unwritten, unintelligible, surface without depth (or perhaps surface with infinite depth). It is open to multiple potentialities: monster, Saracen, Christian, human, man, woman, dog, insentient object, pure signifier. It is, according to the lady herself, “bitven ous to.”<sup>110</sup> Calkin describes this between-ness as exactly the horror of racial-religious intermingling that produced such loathing in both the sultan and the princess’ parents. Calkin cites Kristeva’s assertion that the monstrous abject is “edged with the sublime” and constitutes the “moment when revelation bursts forth” in order to argue that the flesh ball figures the potential indeterminacy of Christendom itself without the presence of the Saracen to provide identitarian limits and defining borders.<sup>111</sup> I am indebted to Calkin’s reading of the flesh here, though I am arguing for a more complete dismantling of any identity stability in the materialization of the flesh. I maintain, rather, that in this indeterminate middle space, this eccentric flesh becomes the site of making, of becoming, even in its temporary manifestation as flesh. It materializes the originary and mobile ground of all identities, out of which both Christian and Saracen come into being.

The flesh ball figures a terrain of being close to Nancy’s image of being-with, or being-many-together, as “the originary situation” of identity.<sup>112</sup> What’s interesting

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<sup>109</sup> In the chronicle analogues of this tale, the child is born half hairy, half smooth, a form of hybridity that suggests, perhaps more than in the *King of Tars*, the child’s liminality between animal and human essences (see Perryman 45-6). Though the animal connections of the sultan, and all Saracens, are repeated frequently in the tale itself – as hounds, wild boars, or lions – to substantiate the animal/human hybrid nature of the flesh ball.

<sup>110</sup> line 604

<sup>111</sup> See page 119-20 for Calkin’s good discussion of the disruptive potential of the monstrous abject flesh.

<sup>112</sup> Nancy 41

to me here is the movement, even the oscillation, that this being-with requires. “It assumes movement, displacement, and deployment” as central to identification;<sup>113</sup> being-with insists upon interrelationship of identities in order to *be* identities, upon the infinite breaking open of identitarian horizons as the state of being of all selves. In this model, there’s no place for a monumentally understood, static, enclosed identity. Rather, Nancy suggests that identity is communal, is predicated upon an other for meaning. The flesh ball provides the material figure of this external self-positioning, the fleshy ground of identity as group affiliation or intermingling that is “always and indefinitely” in the process of being completed. That is, the flesh, while it exists as formless and without and between, itself contains this idea of being as “with” - “The one/the other is neither ‘by’, nor ‘for’, nor ‘in’, nor ‘despite’, but rather ‘with’” – in its very conception; its form reveals both the finitude and the infinitude of being that “with” implies.<sup>114</sup>

In the sense that the flesh ball provides a terrain of origin across which identity is both unmade and made anew, potentially infinitely, it figures pure flesh as a kind of palimpsest. MacKendrick describes all bodies as palimpsestic: receivers of inscription, our skins are always already written, resmoothed via the cut, the scrape, and written again.<sup>115</sup> Like both Christian and Saracen bodies in the *King of Tars*, whose skins are seemingly always available for a kind of somatic remarking, recoloring. This supple flesh – between Christian and Saracen bodies, the figure of their intermingling – looks like the origin of embodied identification, literally uninscribed, smooth and formless from the beginning. Its surfaces cannot image identity with normative and static identity markers; it is without nose or eye – or white shoulder or black brow - or any

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<sup>113</sup> Nancy 38

<sup>114</sup> Nancy 36, 34

<sup>115</sup> MacKendrick 151

other feature via which every other character has been affiliated with a particular racial-religious fantasy.

Certainly flesh elsewhere, emptied of blood and organs or cut off from identifying features, can signal a kind of abject death, as the lifeless, eviscerated flesh of the many slaughtered Saracens manifests at the close of the narrative. Their bloodless bodies indicate the space of the unlivable which they inhabit, signal their ideological sublimation. However the flesh child –alone, bloodless, boneless, *without* and *before* eyes, nose, limbs, or features, *between* racial/religious identities – occupies the problematically productive space of multiple potential identifications. If, according to Jerome, “Christians are made, not born,” then the contours of the formless flesh becomes a surface before, without, between such making, the pure flesh out of which all identities – Christian, Muslim, human, animal – potentially both come into being with each other.

The text resonates with this self making across the miraculous and eccentric flesh: repeating that Christians are “made”– across the child’s flesh, as well as the eccentric flesh of Christ – four times in 150 lines. The lady tells the priest who baptizes the child: “We schul make Cristen men of houndes,” and twice instructs the sultan to “do þe Cristen make,” once as he observes the transformation of the flesh child again after she tells him of the transformation of Christ from death to life.<sup>116</sup> The priest also agrees to “make þe Cristen man” and then baptizes the sultan.<sup>117</sup> This Christian making is described:

þe soudan, wiþ gode wille anon,  
Dede of his cloþes euerichon  
To resevue his baptize.

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<sup>116</sup> ll 743, 820, 875

<sup>117</sup> line 893

þe Cristen prest hi3t Cleophas;  
He cleped þe soudan of Damas  
After his owhen name.  
His hide, þat blac & loþely was,  
Al white bicom, þurth Godes gras,  
& clere wiþouten blame.<sup>118</sup>

In this terrain already unmarked by proper names – the princess, the king and queen of Tars, and the sultan until now, are all unnamed – it is significant that the sultan receives a name here. Cleophas is the name of one of the two disciples who unwittingly encounter the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus, just after his crucifixion.<sup>119</sup> They do not recognize him until evening, when over dinner he breaks bread, blesses it, and gives it to them, vanishing. It is as if taking the broken bread/body into their hands, their proximity to that ruptured and plentiful body, opens their eyes to divine recognition. The sultan's new name and its biblical context reinforces what I am arguing about the eccentric body as the fertile terrain of identification, as it invokes the eccentric body of Christ, broken and consumed, as the source of identification. In its continued excess, its continued multiplicity and circulation and especially in its touch – the doubleness of which confirms both the one who touches as well as what is touched<sup>120</sup> – these eccentric bodies, both Christ's and the flesh child's, provide the excessive ground of identity.

Of course, the potential multiplicity – the potential for actualizing Saracen, or Christian, human or animal, male or female – materialized across the formless flesh is foreclosed by the end of the narrative: the lump child turns out to be a beautiful,

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<sup>118</sup> lines 922-30

<sup>119</sup> See Luke 24:13-35

<sup>120</sup> On the double nature of touch, see Nancy 63.

Christian white boy. The Saracens' viscera – spilled out, on display – reinforces their unnatural and subjugated position in the narrative terrain, the violence of their erasure serving to “redraw the faltering self/other boundary, this time in blood.”<sup>121</sup> That the text spends the last quarter of its lines, nearly three hundred lines of 1200 in total, on the war that the Christianized, whitened sultan makes on the Saracen population, suggests that much effort must be expended to redraw those identity boundaries, to enfold the converted sultan into his Christian selfhood, to erase the possibilities for identity circulation opened across any body of conversion.

Yet for a moment, that fleshy space conceived between the sultan and the princess, unformed and multiple, provides a figure of the tantalizing space of illegible identification and indeterminate, formless being that implicates all identifications, however temporarily, in this romance. My point is that in a narrative space that insists upon fleshy surfaces as planes of essential affiliations, as a guarantor of that essential legibility, the instantiation of the illegible flesh, mutable, formless, multiple, and circulating begins to unground any notion of a stable identity, both ideologically as well as physically. Bodies begin to change, identities slide, in its presence, even at its (*in utero*) touch.

So, what can we make of formlessness as it manifests across the lump child in the *King of Tars*? Reading the contours of this eccentric flesh reveals, just for a moment, the essential instability of identities in this narrative, and their, even temporary, reproductive futility. Attending to this formless flesh, and the fleshy surface of the romance as a whole, opens, however briefly, the possibility of unintelligible identification, offering the pleasure – tantalizing, perhaps perverse, eventually foreclosed - of existing in a space in which any identity written across bodies cannot exist in an oppositional mode, in which identity may be better

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<sup>121</sup> Cohen, *Identity Machines*, 205.

understood, not as a noun, but rather as a verb, with its own movements and trajectories and potential becomings, with the flesh as its palimpsestic terrain of unmaking and making, of ever-mobile coming into being. The *King of Tars* figures the prehistory of identity as one in which any self can potentially emerge.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Identity Flows in the *Siege of Jerusalem*

“We have the urge to cross boundaries because this crossing is both the expression and the act (both the revelation and the conjuration) of being most fully alive.”

“Where language reaches its descriptive limits, one may resort to the imagery of the cut and the life that flows from it” (MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, 129, 144).

In order to continue this discussion of overdetermined corporeality and the identitarian diffusion or mobilities those narrative moments materialize, I turn to the *Siege of Jerusalem*, arguably the most excessively corporeal (and corporeally explicit) poem of the alliterative revival.

#### Histories and Beginnings

Judging from the nine extant manuscript witnesses, the *Siege of Jerusalem* was one of the most popular alliterative poems of the late fourteenth century. Only *Piers Plowman* exists in more manuscripts. Yet, post-medieval critical reception of the *Siege* has generally not reflected that readerly enthusiasm. For most of its critical life in the modern period, this story – the chivalric/romance interpretation of Jerusalem’s destruction in 70AD – has drawn critics’ scorn or outright revulsion in response to what has been viewed as the most partisan, violent, “gratuitously and imaginatively vicious”<sup>122</sup> treatment of Jews in any literature of the period. Perhaps understandably, given this focus on the text’s anti-Semitic violence, critics’ reluctance to examine the poem is often reiterated with intense language. Pearsall calls the poem “the very

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<sup>122</sup> Chism 317; see also Livingston 17, Hamel 182, Spearing, *Readings*, 166-7

model of a decadent poetic.<sup>123</sup> Spearing complains that the poem, by virtue of its popular appeal, provides “a perfect example of the weaknesses of medieval religious legend.” In addition to the visceral violence, he is particularly critical of the poem’s “implausible elements” like the miraculous cures and the infestation of wasps (which give *Vespasian* his poorly punned name).<sup>124</sup> This critical impatience seems to stand for a deeper revulsion to, certainly discomfort with, the poem that is certainly a reasonable, even ethical, initial response to a text that some have noted seems to take special pleasure in Jewish suffering.<sup>125</sup> As Christian Romans avenge Christ’s death upon the Jews in Jerusalem, brains, corpses, and a fetus are flung across the landscape; Jewish bodies are gutted, flayed, skinned and set upon by animals; entrails spill out ankle-deep on the battlefield; a starving mother roasts and eats her child; and the Jewish survivors emerge from a destroyed Jerusalem emaciated and spectral, like walking dead, or, as the poet phrases it, “No gretter than a grehounde to grype on the medil.”<sup>126</sup>

My own interest in this poem began across this insistently grotesque corporeal terrain. I was literally stopped in my readerly tracks, drawn in and undone, upon first encountering the bodies that materialize across the *Siege*, skinned and bursting, projecting their insides, flowing out and taking in, circulating in repeated cycles of disease and health, proximity and alienation. The strange and abject bodies of the *Siege* seemed to me then, and now, to be continually and strategically reiterated bodies of excess, literally dripping with a saturated, overdetermined meaning. These bodies seem to appear precisely at the threshold of the articulable, figuring a rupture beyond words. It is the call of their “intense participatory physicality,”<sup>127</sup> a particularly

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<sup>123</sup> Pearsall, *Old and Middle English Poetry*, 169

<sup>124</sup> Spearing, *Readings*, 166

<sup>125</sup> *ibid* 172

<sup>126</sup> l 1252; see also ll 1147-50; 1249-52

<sup>127</sup> MacKendrick 128.

spectral and meaningful physicality, to which I respond. Why are these bodies invoked so regularly in the *Siege*, to a greater extent than in any of its sources and analogues? In what ways can we trace their surfaces, unfold the layers of meaning materialized across their ruptured skins? What kinds of medieval and modern identifications do they materialize?

It is perhaps not surprising that the *Siege of Jerusalem* evokes responses that often center on identities: the poem's setting in Jerusalem figures the geographic and symbolic nexus of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian self-definition.<sup>128</sup> Further, that identification is particularly enfolded along the contours of the bodies that circulate across the *Siege's* narrative terrains. Indeed, in a story set in Jerusalem, contextualized by the tortured body of Christ, and again by religious conversion manifested on bodies – diseased, then whole – the text's treatment of bodies and/as identity construction might arguably be *the* terrain at stake in the poem, the field across which the poem's meaning takes place. And the text invites its readers to follow the movements of its bodies to determine the identities of those who wear that skin. These bodies are lifted up and literally gaped at and peered into – Christ, Caiaphas, Vespasian, and the hosts of wounded Jewish and Roman soldiers on the battlefield – in order to read their identities in and across their ruptures. At the most basic level, if Christ's tortured, “burst” body both marks him as the ur-body of conversion as well as foreshadowing the Jews' fate, then Titus and Vespasian's conversion, and their healed bodies also set the terms, together with Christ, for the rest of the poem: broken bodies and whole bodies work together to constitute Christian identity.

This corporeal construction of Christian identity is often read in the *Siege*

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<sup>128</sup> See Yeager, *Jerusalem*, 1, 6-10. There, she argues that depictions of Jerusalem are deployed to create and guarantee both national and individual Christian/sacral identity in late medieval England.

along a static binary plane of univocal anti-Semitism: Jewish bodies are broken, while Christian bodies are whole. This reading functions in a larger medieval system of embodiment that connects the Jewish body with pollution, fragmentation, and degeneration and the Christian body with what is clean, whole, pure, and incorruptible. Yet, this intersection of violence, healing and bodies is more complex in the *Siege* than any single fantasy of the polluted Jewish body alongside an impermeable Christian body. Even reading sympathy into the text's treatment of Jews (as Millar, Akbari, and Van Court do) does not go far enough in complicating the text's presentation of Jewish bodies, or Christian bodies. That is, reading pity in the text's depiction of Jewish suffering does not begin to argue for Christian bodies' participation in that same somatic rupture or for the inability of identities to hold together across the trajectory of the narrative. Instead, I maintain that, while Jews are, indeed, famously torn apart in the *Siege*, Christians and Roman bodies are also polluted and fragmented within the poem: Judas' body "bursts," as does Christ's; Peter is tortured, like Nero's wife, mother, and a series of Roman emperors. Perhaps most tellingly for my reading, the bodies of Christian converts, once made whole through faith, are diseased and broken anew, culminating significantly in Christian bodies lying opened and slain alongside their Jewish counterparts by the end of the narrative. If bodies materialize identity, I'd like to explore what happens to Christian identities in the face of Christian corporeal circulations alongside their Roman and Jewish counterparts. While almost all critics have seen Jewish and Roman identities as shifting, none have extended the trajectory of those identity mobilities to include Christian identification.

I suggest that Jew and Christian not only face each other in the *Siege*, their identities, like their histories, seem inextricably intertwined, and the boundaries of their existences ultimately blurred (or, employing the historical/spiritual model of

supercession, I would add a contiguous *recessionary* identity movement, a reverberating back and forth identity movement). If the *Siege of Jerusalem* evinces an “uncanny power to disturb,”<sup>129</sup> I suggest that part of that disturbance, alongside our abhorrence of gleeful partisan violence, is precisely generated by that violence’s refusal of the very functions of identity formation – not just Jewish or Roman, but specifically Christian identity formation – it has been invoked to reinforce. Just as Jewish bodies are ejected from the Christian community – literally turned out, spilled, hurled across the narrative and geographic landscape – Christian bodies consistently approach this state of abjection, rejection, and un-health that marks medieval Jewish corporeal identity. While violence, as some critics have argued, is the Christian tool to reinscribe the boundaries between Jew and Christian, and to reify a constructed Christian identity, I argue that in the violent abjection of Jewish bodies, Christian identity threatens diffusion or reversion, at times indistinguishable from its ideological and theological histories. Ejection and introjection become the constitutive movements of identification, and this movement happens across the threshold of corporeal surfaces, where the truth of the subject, like skin, is infinitely exposed.<sup>130</sup> Through an analysis of the trajectory of bodies in the poem – Christian, Jewish, clean, polluted, wounded, and healed – I hope to show that this poem is marked by a distinct dis-ease with the stable categories of Jew and Christian as materialized on their corporeal surfaces. Instead, the *Siege* presents all identities in a kind of circulation or exchange: Christian and Jewish identities reverberate in a vibration of being-in-between, or being-with, that does not ever fully rearticulate a closed identity position.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s discussion of being-with in *Being Singular Plural* has helped me to articulate some of the possibilities for being that are driving this study. I

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<sup>129</sup> Nicholson 448

<sup>130</sup> MacKendrick 60

have particularly resonated with his early claim that everything pertaining to the human must be vacated, undone, disconnected from a “specifiable horizon” in order to recapture a meaning of human that is in itself undone, fractured, mobile, and thus the infinite opening of that horizon, bound by no fixed enclosure.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, for Nancy, “meaning begins... where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself *as such*,” in order to acknowledge its endless reverberation with an Other who is really the other half of itself.<sup>132</sup> Nancy’s disjointed presence echoes Foucault’s vision of a fragmented self when he writes, famously, “The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.”<sup>133</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis makes a related claim when she argues for “the importance of seeing the person as part of a field of relations and of being open to paths and modes for the constitution of the self different from those in nineteenth-century thought.” Consequently, the most important task might not be to reconstruct a sedimented individualism, “but to keep it constantly in assay.”<sup>134</sup> This rejection of essential identities and their meanings, movement towards an idea of identity as circulation or reverberation, while keeping identity always in assay, being responsive to its embodied movements and interminglings, underlies the project of this dissertation and is a theory of identity that I believe comes closer to what medieval narratives about identity claim for themselves.

### **Reading Jews**

While the *Siege of Jerusalem* seems maniacally preoccupied with Jews, it is unlikely that the author of the poem, writing around 1370 or 1380 in west Yorkshire,

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<sup>131</sup> *Being Singular Plural*, xii

<sup>132</sup> *ibid* 2-3, 11

<sup>133</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 148

<sup>134</sup> Davis 63

had any personal experience with a Jewish population.<sup>135</sup> Since the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, the only Jews in England would arguably have been the few converts housed at the *domus conversorum* in London and perhaps at its sister institution in Oxford.<sup>136</sup> Even without their physical presence, Jewish identity, or the fantasy of that identity, exercised a powerful presence in medieval English life and theology. Stephen Kruger, along with Jeremy Cohen, Lisa Lampert and others, recognizes a sort of “schizophrenic view of the Jews” predominant in pre-expulsion England and perhaps even more significant after 1290. This idea refers to the Jew one encounters daily and the theological, unreal Jew “in whom diverse stereotypes come to be mixed and added together.”<sup>137</sup> This construction, variously termed the virtual, spectral, or hermeneutic Jew, is helpful as it provides a framework in which to parse Christian fantasies of the Jew even without his physical presence.<sup>138</sup> The representational life of this hermeneutic Jew often connects him with death, the unredeemable, and a theological and historical pastness that has been superceded by Christ, the New Man, and by the Christian West based on the New Life he inaugurates.<sup>139</sup> Jewish history and scripture provide the origins of Christian history and scripture; Christianity imagines itself as springing from, fulfilling, and superceding its Jewish past.<sup>140</sup>

Yet, while the representational life of the medieval Jew is one of death and supercession, that otherness always implicates Christian identity. While Muslims

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<sup>135</sup> Hanna and Lawton xxxv

<sup>136</sup> Bale 15

<sup>137</sup> Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, xviii. Further, Lampert connects the hermeneutic Jew with the hermeneutic woman, arguing that both together reinforce Christian self-definition (see 35-56).

<sup>138</sup> For discussions of the various ideological constructs of Jewishness, see Cohen 2-3, 5; Lampert 9-10, 29; Kruger xx-xxi; Tomasch 253. See also Žižek’s influential theorizing about the Jewish fantasy in which Jews are “the point at which the immanent social antagonism assumes a positive form, erupts on to the social surface” (*Sublime Object*, 127-8).

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Paul’s assertion that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).

<sup>140</sup> See the introduction to Kruger’s *Spectral Jew* for an especially cogent and comprehensive discussion of Christianity’s origins in Judaism and the importance of Judaism’s supercession to Christian theology and iconography.

were seen as the enemy just outside the borders of Christendom, Jews were often portrayed as the Other within. In a literal sense, Jews were the only non-Christian group to exist within both the political and historical borders of medieval Christendom.<sup>141</sup> If, according to Jerome, “Christians are made, not born,” then Jews were often, in their theological or hermeneutic embodiment, at the paradoxical center of a denaturalized Christian self-definition and realization through their enforced marginalization.<sup>142</sup> I agree with Lampert’s claim that Christian status as constructed identity can be analyzed alongside the mechanisms that construct Jewish identities, showing their mutual denaturalization as well as their mutual implication.<sup>143</sup> The specter of the Jew is conjured up in order to be conjured away, creating a space in which Jewish virtual, and insistently eviscerated, presence serves to reaffirm the naturalized presence, reality and redeemed identity of Christians.<sup>144</sup>

At the same time, while Christendom’s Jewish past has been superseded, medieval theologians following Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux acknowledge the need for a continuing Jewish presence within Christendom. According to Augustine, Jews testify to the validity of Christ’s claims to divinity “by their possession and preservation of those books...bear[ing] witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies of Christ.”<sup>145</sup> Bernard also argues for a necessary Jewish presence within Christendom. He writes that Jews function as “living letters of Scripture, constantly represen[ting] the Lord’s passion.” Consequently, Bernard maintains that Jews ought not be killed, but should be “dispersed and subjugated.”<sup>146</sup> In their continued presence

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<sup>141</sup> See also Millar 156.

<sup>142</sup> qtd in Lampert 1.

<sup>143</sup> See also Žižek’s influential theorizing about the Jewish fantasy in which Jews are “the point at which the immanent social antagonism assumes a positive form, erupts on to the social surface” (*Sublime Object* 127-8).

<sup>144</sup> Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, xviii, see also xxii-xxiii; see also Lampert 169.

<sup>145</sup> *City of God*, 18.46. See especially chapters 1 and 6 of Cohen’s *Living Letters of the Law* for his outlines of Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness and Bernard’s protection of the Jews in the context of the Second Crusade.

<sup>146</sup> qtd in Cohen 2, 234-6

within Christendom, Jews testify to their own pastness, their obsolescence, as well as providing a witness of Christ's passion and Christendom's present, superceding chosenness.<sup>147</sup>

These witnessing Jews often circulate in the Christian imaginary in a particular fantasy of physicality and embodiment. This Christian emphasis on the body is not surprising: Christianity at its core is intimately involved with embodiment, with the marriage of flesh and spirit that is particularly enfolded in skin. The incarnation (the "Word made flesh" according to John's gospel), virgin birth, immaculate conception, transubstantiation, resurrection, Eucharist, the relic, the saint all operate upon and from within skin to facilitate communion with the divine. However, while some bodies were valued as vehicles to divine truth, certain other bodies were conversely repudiated "as animal-like, disgusting, and contaminating," namely women, lepers, and Jews.<sup>148</sup> Jewish readings of scripture were thought to be too literal, a primary example of their over-emphasis on the physical, letter of the law. Reflecting their excessive and eccentric corporeality, Jews were associated with skin diseases like leprosy and other foul smelling sores, a menstrual-like monthly flow, copious bleeding from hemorrhages, hemorrhoids, and swollen glands, in addition to a variety of "peculiar and secret afflictions" of the body, animal-like bodies, and unbounded sexual appetites.<sup>149</sup> Further, Jews' excessive, and dangerous, affiliation with the flesh was often thought to extend to Christians in ritual murder, cannibalism, host desecration, and well-poisoning, "all of which were thought to threaten Christian bodies at the same time that they expressed a certain monstrous Jewish bodiliness."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> see also Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, 5-6

<sup>148</sup> See Kruger, "Bodies of Jews," 302. MacKendrick's discussion in chapter 1 of *Word made Skin* responds to the pleasures of the enfleshed God "with an appropriately intense desire," and is an especially compelling discussion of the importance of the flesh in Christian spirituality, theology, and representation.

<sup>149</sup> Kruger, "The Bodies of Jews," 303; see also Trachtenberg 50-1, 140-55, 167, 187; Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, 90; Lampert 38

<sup>150</sup> Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, xxiv

While the miracles of Christianity, like the Eucharist, are presented as “indestructible, changeable, full of mystery,” fantasies of Jewish embodiment often counterposition Jews as immobile or intractable, unrepentantly mired in the earth of literalness and physicality.<sup>151</sup>

The medieval response to these overly determined Jewish bodies is often one of violence; and it is at moments of most vulnerability – like conversion – or surrounding theological controversies – like transubstantiation – that Christian responses to Jews become their most insistently turbulent, focused on the bodies of Jews.<sup>152</sup> Mary Douglas’ seminal work on bodies and social ordering is instructive here, as she maintains that, far from tangential or differentiated, the borders of bodies become important sites at which social and ideological anxieties are iterated. According to Douglas, corporeal boundaries “can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” in the social body.<sup>153</sup> Lampert agrees that “representations of bodily orifices, bodily margins, and the matter that they excrete are symbolic of the boundaries of society itself” as well as identifications such as Christian and Jew that inhabit and embody those boundaries.<sup>154</sup>

If Jews are the Other Within – within Christian geographic, historic, and theological borders – then their ritual violent ejection from Christian community would seem to enact what Butler sees as the fundamental movement of identity construction, as the Christian subject “is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Evans 168

<sup>152</sup> Lampert 2; see also Kruger, *Spectral Jew*, 132-3.

<sup>153</sup> Douglas 115

<sup>154</sup> Lampert 11; see also Nicholson 452. Mills argues persuasively that medieval representations of violence are constitutive of reality about self and Other and the regulatory systems that govern the bodies represented (10, 16-17).

<sup>155</sup> *Bodies that Matter* 3

According to Butler, this identitarian movement is a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.<sup>156</sup> I am interested in exactly where that movement destabilizes, or reveals itself as circulatory motion as such, in order to expose the fixity of identity boundaries as an effect, but not part of the real. This identitarian model's insistence on inside and outside, the relational interdependence of subject and abject, recalls the historical, religious, and geographic connections between Christian and Jew, both superceded and necessary as a perpetual witness of that supercession. What I hope to show in the following reading of the *Siege* is its simultaneous participation in and frustration of this movement in which repudiated Jewish bodies constitute Christian identity. The *Siege*'s dissolution of corporeal boundaries allows a space of commingling of identities and communities in conflict – pagan Roman, converted Christian, and Jew. Those bodies' excessive flows figure the insistent dispersal of the identities and communities they materialize, leaving Christian, Jewish, Roman identity contingent, open, mobile. MacKendrick agrees that excessive flows lead to the destruction of all boundaries.<sup>157</sup> Borders, edges, margins, and the transgressions of those thresholds have been seen as sites of real identity making, transition, and transformation by many.<sup>158</sup> According to Nietzsche "Whenever humans have thought it necessary to make themselves a memory, this never happened without blood, tortures, sacrifices."<sup>159</sup> Like Nietzsche and MacKendrick, the *Siege* presents the creation of a remembering self, across the dermal limits of the human, with blood and rent flesh.

### **Boundless Bodies**

The poem announces its specific preoccupation with corporeal violence from

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<sup>156</sup> *ibid* 9

<sup>157</sup> *Word Made Skin* 127

<sup>158</sup> See also Yamamoto 9; Gilchrist 47-9; Robert Yeager 146; Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 15-16, 24.

<sup>159</sup> *Genealogy of Morals* 295

its first battle scene. It is a violence that often plays out across corporeal limits, as the skins of Jewish bodies are exploded and peeled back, their insides exteriorized. Following their first battle with Christians, the sheer abundance of Jewish corpses is astounding:

The fals Jewes in the felde fallen so thicke  
As hail forward Heven, hepe over other;  
So was the bent over-brad, bloody by-runne,  
With ded bodies aboute alle the brod vale.  
Myght no stede doun stap bot on stele wede,  
Or on burne, other on beste, or on bright scheldes<sup>160</sup>

Jewish corpses here are so plentiful as to make up a landscape of their own, a terrain upon which Christian horse and horseman trod. The scene is literally “thicke,” each verb, each adjective pictures the stifling, gruesome pile of bodies and their viscera all around and under foot. The image’s violence is particularly striking when compared with an analogue poem, *Titus and Vespasian*, composed perhaps a few years before the *Siege*. There, Vespasian simply “slogh and brent all þat he fonde,/ And dreven forth bestes, with grete route,/ Þat þei founden þeraboute.”<sup>161</sup> The absence of bodies and viscera in this account foregrounds the *Siege*’s particular interest in revealing its bodies. Further, *Titus and Vespasian* recounts the divine “chaunce” sent to further the Christian cause: “rayn and hayll, frost and snowe,/ And stiff wyndes þat loude gan blowe.”<sup>162</sup> The *Siege* transforms these natural phenomena into a hailstorm of slaughtered Jewish bodies, a displacement across bodies perhaps meant to materialize divine judgment.

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<sup>160</sup> 601-6 [The false Jews in the field fall so thick/ As hail from heaven, heaping over each other;/ So was the field covered over, running with blood,/ With dead bodies over all the broad valley.] All translations are mine, following Livingston’s glosses.

<sup>161</sup> 2754-56.

<sup>162</sup> *ibid* 2765-66

One could read this violent deployment of Jewish bodies in the *Siege of Jerusalem* as simply another example, even an extreme example, of the kind of vicious corporeal response typical of anti-Semitic narrative. Yet, I am arguing that the force, the excessive and repeated iteration of this corporeal violence moves the bodies and identities depicted into a more complicated kind of (inter)relation. Jews are not simply killed as the conflict escalates, their bodies are particularly dismembered, taken apart, or turned inside out, and I maintain that this opening works to complicate the kind of unilateral Christian identity construction this kind of evisceration can often signal. In order to explain what I mean, I turn now to one of the most graphically brutal scenes of the narrative. Vespasian captures Caiaphas and his band of Pharisees and metes out judgment for their role in Christ's death, ordering that:

ech freke were quyk-fleyn, the felles of clene:  
 Firste to be on a bent with blonkes to-drawe,  
 And suth honget on an hep upon heye galwes,  
 The feet to the firmament, alle folke to byholden,  
 With hony upon ech half the hydeles anoynted;  
 Corres and cattes with claires ful scharpe  
 Foure kagged and knyt to Cayphases theyes;  
 Twey apys at his armes to angren hym more,  
 That rented the rawe flesche upon rede peces.  
 So was he pyned fram prime with persched sides  
 Tille the sonne doun sett in the someretye.<sup>163</sup>

Caiaphas' body becomes the site of Christian vengeance as they literally tear it apart:

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<sup>163</sup>698-708. [Each man would be flayed alive, cleaned of flesh:/ [But] First to be drawn upon a field by horses,/ And then hanged all together upon a high gallows,/ The feet to the sky, [for] all the people to see./ With honey upon each half the hideless are anointed;/ Four dogs and cats with claws full sharp/ Caught and latched to Caiaphas' thighs;/ Two apiece at his arms to torment him more./ That rent the raw flesh into red pieces./ So was he pained from prime with pierced sides/ Until the sun set in the summertime.]

his body is flayed alive, drawn, hung, pierced, scratched, shredded into “rede peces.” This vengeance ranges upon the surface of the body, multiplying its planes, exteriorizing layer upon layer of flesh, each new surface becoming another terrain of rupture and penetration in a corporeally realized dispossession of the self.<sup>164</sup> For all the proliferation of flesh, what is equally striking are the absences: blood is largely absent from this scene (especially remarkable in this siege landscape elsewhere filled with bloody profusions), any hint of the victim’s pain (other than that he is “angren” and “pyned”), or any sound that he makes. In fact, the clinical nature of the scene, bloodless and silent, not only adds to the horror of the moment but also presents this body to us alienated, depersonalized, an object of overdetermined meaning and dispossessed flow as layered as the surfaces of his flesh continuously revealed. Further, this death plays upon medieval stereotypes of Jewish connection to beasts, not only in the dogs and cats tied to his skinned and honeyed limbs, but in that his death replicates the death of unruly animals, particularly pigs, in an ironic and humiliating association with porcine taboo.<sup>165</sup>

While Caiaphas’ torture does not appear, even in sanitized form, in *Titus and Vespasian*, this graphic and excessively corporeal punishment enacts in part a well-known image of public social humiliation – the inverted hanging – that Mills suggests was reserved as a special humiliation for the late medieval elite.<sup>166</sup> Mills provides two accounts from the 1430’s of noblemen, all English, who are depicted on tableaux hanging by their feet. In the first, each English knight is completely armed, “at each side a devil binding him with chains” and two crows near his head about to peck out his eyes; in the second, Flemings paint pictures of the English hanging “by the helis”

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<sup>164</sup> See also Feltham and Miller’s discussion of Dante’s skinned bodies in “Original Skin” for his discussion of “the elastic possibilities of the flesh as a figuring device for the diseases of the soul” (184), especially page 189.

<sup>165</sup> See Mills 49

<sup>166</sup> Mills 38

during their siege of the English-held Calais, done “in despite and hoker [scorn] of Englissh men.”<sup>167</sup> Mills maintains that these painted scenes of inverse hanging draw on an actually employed punishment known as the “Jewish execution” in which a Jewish offender was strung up alive by his feet with angry dogs tied up similarly on each side.<sup>168</sup> One of the most detailed descriptions of such a punishment, though later in date (found in a late seventeenth-century Swiss statute book), instructs:

He is to be hanged as a thief, by the feet with a rope or chain, on a specially erected gallows, between two raging or snarling dogs, betwixt heaven and earth, so high that grass and herb may grow beneath him; thus he shall be committed to the dogs and the birds and the air, so that he be estranged from the earth; and you, judge, people and guards, assembled about the gallows, who watch over him, until he suffer death upon the gallows.<sup>169</sup>

Mills emphasizes the in-between-ness of this pained body: he is suspended between heaven and hell, between life and death, human and beast, between salvation and damnation.<sup>170</sup> Part of the goal of this kind of execution is explicitly the condemned Jew’s estrangement, from his own rooted embodiment as social being, as human, as his body is given over to animals, the elements, the supernatural. *Titus and Vespasian* echoes that estrangement in its image of Judas’ hanging death as specifically “up in the ayre,” figuring his offense explicitly against angels and humans, against human and divine.<sup>171</sup> Additionally, the text that accompanies a rare, early sixteenth-century woodcut image of a Jewish execution echoes the idea that this kind of death figures a

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<sup>167</sup> *ibid* 44

<sup>168</sup> *ibid* 47. See also his extensive and helpful bibliography on the Jewish execution.

<sup>169</sup> *qtd in* Mills 48

<sup>170</sup> This kind of death was often reserved for unrepentant Jews, in which case perhaps death is deferred or delayed in order to give time for the condemned to repent (Mills 49).

<sup>171</sup> lines 4857-62

fundamental “alienation from earth” that is in excess of death itself.<sup>172</sup>

Caiaphas’ execution resonates with these descriptions and also intensifies and moves beyond them. His punishment is explicitly enacted as a spectral affair: the bodies are displayed “That alle the cite myght se the sorow that they driven [suffered],”<sup>173</sup> and thus specifically offered as a field of meaning to be “read” by all observers, then and now. This spectrality contributes to the existential alienation found in both instances above, as does the abandonment to frenzied, non-rational animal rage. Animals here materialize – bestialize – demonic torment in hell and contribute to the estrangement of the body, via its surface.

However, not only is Caiaphas flayed alive, he is coated with honey, the addition of which, like the skinning, is not to my knowledge found in any other description of Jewish execution; these add (and subtract) other layers, literally, to this punishment. One assumes that the honey attracts the animals, motivates not only their tearing the flesh, but their consumption of it as well. Yet the nature of this execution requires that this body will never be consumed entirely: it exists in a kind of suspended animation, literally and existentially “betwixt heaven and earth,” a visual object lesson in flesh that constantly replicates its surfaces, insistently flows.

This honey-covered, skinless body catches observers, then and now, in a posture of repellant fascination in the midst of singular trauma. The image of Caiaphas’ gruesome body recalls the most famous contemporary response to the *Siege*, Hanna’s oft-quoted reference to the poem as “the chocolate-covered tarantula of the alliterative movement...so offensive as to exist on the suppressed margins of critical attention, unaccompanied by commentary.”<sup>174</sup> The chocolate-covered tarantula is an extraordinary and complex figure – its own excessive body – that

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<sup>172</sup> qtd in Mills 50.

<sup>173</sup> line 712

<sup>174</sup> Hanna “Contextualizing the *Siege*” 109

accompanies almost every current discussion of the poem (for example, the tarantula metaphor appeared in all three papers in the 2009 Kalamazoo panel on the *Siege*). The *Siege*, like Caiaphas' skinless and honeyed body, is a text from which we cannot turn, lingering as it does upon the threshold of fascination and abhorrence, guilty introjection and violent abjection.<sup>175</sup> In this most uncomfortably graphic of moments, with punitive violence layered upon his flowing surface, Caiaphas' body begins to approach, not only an alien abjection – the just punishment for an intractable Jewish offender, the ultimate mis-reader of God's Word in Christ – but something more ambiguous and mobile. His body begins to circulate among other figures of honeyed bodies: bodies of sanctification, of a promised plentitude, healing, erotic desire<sup>176</sup>, spiritual nourishment, and divine word and presence and grace. The plentitude of the promised land is figured as flowing with milk and honey.<sup>177</sup> God's provision and nourishment is likened to honey from a rock in the Psalms; and John the Baptist is literally and miraculously sustained by wild honey provided by God in the wilderness.<sup>178</sup> God's word is like honey in the books of Psalms, Ezekiel, and Revelation.<sup>179</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux tastes the "delicious nurture of grace" and the "fervor of devotion" on his tongue like honey; and Isaiah connects the eating of honey with a state of righteousness.<sup>180</sup> Caiaphas's own connection with honey sets these multiple honeyed moments into motion. Further, his honeyed and flowing body comes into proximity with other saints whose sanctity is evinced by their own sweet

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<sup>175</sup> For other thoughts on the guilt of the poem, both in reading and writing about, see especially Nicholson's essay, "Haunted Itineraries." Also relevant here is the universal compulsion of *Siege* critics, myself included, to rehearse the history of repulsion that attends the poem's reception. This insistent reiteration performs a kind of critical confession of the poem's, or the critic's guilt, before any sustained analysis can happen.

<sup>176</sup> See Song of Songs 4:11 and 5:1

<sup>177</sup> See Exodus 3:8 and following

<sup>178</sup> Psalm 81:16 likens God's provision and nourishment to "honey from the rock." Similarly, according to the synoptic gospels, John the Baptist survives on locusts and wild honey in a reference to his living off the word of God (Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6).

<sup>179</sup> See Psalm 119:103, Ezekiel 3:3, Revelation 10:7-11

<sup>180</sup> See Bernard's Sermon 8:6 *On the Song of Songs*; Isaiah 7:15

bodily flows.<sup>181</sup> One such saint, appearing within the *Siege* itself, is Veronica, whose veil emits a similar honeyed sweetness as evidence of its sanctity, at the touch of which Vespasian immediately converts and is healed.<sup>182</sup> Beyond his association with a generalized sanctified sweetness, Caiaphas' specifically pierced sides bring him into representational proximity with Christ's salvific body, another Word made flesh. Just as Caiaphas' rent flesh and his pierced sides are the visual guarantee of his identity as condemned, estranged Jew, Christ's pierced sides and the visual objectivity of those sides are specifically invoked as the evidence of his divinity, both in Hebrew scripture, by the gospel writers, and by Christ himself after his resurrection. The gospel of John quotes Zechariah as a prophesy about the importance of Christ's broken body:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.<sup>183</sup>

Later, when confronting a doubting Thomas after his resurrection, Christ says to him, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe"<sup>184</sup> Thomas only encounters the divine in the spaces of Christ's rent body.

My point is that as this punishment of Caiaphas, meant as a perverse inversion

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<sup>181</sup> Millar agrees that Caiaphas' torture resonates with the torture of Christian saints, arguing that the depiction is meant to arouse sympathy for them (220).

<sup>182</sup> 243-5; 253-58. "A flavour flambeth therfro; they felleded hit alle:/ Was never odour nee yr upon erthe swetter" (243-5). [A scent erupted from [Veronica's veil]; they all sensed it:/ There was never a smell or an air on earth that was sweeter.] As Eve Kuryluk has noted, the legend of Veronica has its roots in the story of the woman with the flux of blood who is miraculously healed upon touching Christ's robe, found in all three of the synoptic gospels (Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48; Matthew 9:20-22). Kuryluk notes that the force of the story lies in its "marvel of symmetry: the man whose cloth has stopped the woman's bleeding has his own flux of blood which she arrests with her cloth" (7). See also, Citrome 64-5.

<sup>183</sup> Zech 12:10

<sup>184</sup> John 20:19-29

of Christ's torture, renders Caiaphas' body alien and abject, it simultaneously brings that body into representational identification with the divine in a way beyond the ability of the text to control. I don't mean to suggest that this representational proximity to Christ in any way mitigates the horror of the abject scene. I want to say that this corporeal dismantling and resurfacing complicates the scene's horror, refusing to allow readers and viewers to decide finally on the parameters of this tormented body, as its partitioned surfaces circulate and flow across multiple identifications, multiple meanings, from Jew to saint to Christ, that the enactment of corporeal partisan punishment only replicates.

And yet the poem seems to foreclose these identificatory ruptures or movements as soon as they are opened. Tellingly, Caiaphas' penetrated and fragmented body, publicly displayed, seems to replicate itself in the following stanza across specifically Jewish bodies: 700 Jews hurl themselves over the wall, tear their hair, and dash themselves to the ground in response to the gruesome sight.<sup>185</sup> If Caiaphas' flowing body enacts uncomfortable identitarian proximities, the effects of that body are clearly visited upon the Jews alone.

In the next lines, the poem is so insistent on the dismembering of Jewish bodies that the destruction continues beyond their own bodies to everything associated with them. Sabinus guts the Jews' war elephants so that "Rappis rispen forth that rydders an hundred/ Scholde be busy to burie that on a bent lafte."<sup>186</sup> The trajectory of burst boundaries extends to the limits of the town itself, as the destruction of Jerusalem is figured in terms that echo the fragmentation of Jews' bodies:

Burnes were brayned and brosed to deth;

Wymmen wide open walte undere stones;

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<sup>185</sup> lines 713-16

<sup>186</sup> lines 571-2. [[Such] entrails break forth that a hundred ridders [i.e., field-strippers]/ Would be hard-pressed to bury what was left upon the field.]

Frosletes fro the ferst to the flor thrylled;  
And many toret down tilte the Temple aboute.<sup>187</sup>

Like its bodies, Jerusalem's walls are dismantled and burst, opened and despoiled, reaffirming both city and people as abject Other, distinct from Christian positioning.<sup>188</sup> Jerusalem itself is a polyvalent space and can serve variously as a metonym of the Christian soul, the Jewish people, the Church, the heavenly city.<sup>189</sup> In the *Siege*, Jerusalem seems to stand metonymically for not only Jews, but for the boundary and/as identity transgressions that haunt the *Siege* throughout its trajectory. Nicholson comments that the material border of Jerusalem is the nearly exclusive place of action in the story; because "Jerusalem is mostly Jerusalem's walls" it materializes the borders that will be transgressed.<sup>190</sup> If, according to Mary Douglas, "No border fails to affirm cultural definitions," then Jerusalem's walls, like corporeal borders, symbolize the social and religious tensions they witness.<sup>191</sup>

My point here is that these examples of the transgression of Jewish boundaries, corporeal and civic, operate on multiple levels. On the one hand, one can read these images simply as echoing the typical medieval response to, and rearticulation of, fantasies of Jewish embodiment. Certainly, loss of bodily integrity in the *Siege* is presented as the just punishment for the physical torture inflicted upon Christ. This wholesale destruction of everything associated with the Jews – the transgression of all Jewish boundaries – recalls Butler's comments on the abject body as representing "the zone of the uninhabitable."<sup>192</sup> Likewise in the *Siege*, Jewish bodies seem uninhabitable and repeatedly eviscerated, outside the zone of the thinkable; their

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<sup>187</sup> lines 833-36. [Men were brained and bruised to death;/ Women wide open thrown under stones;/ Fortifications from the first to the ground fell;/ And many fell down about the Temple.]

<sup>188</sup> See Chism for a discussion of Jews, Jerusalem, and gold. *Titus and Vespasian* includes an invitation to Christian fighters to literally despoil Jewish bodies to retrieve the gold that the Jews have eaten.

<sup>189</sup> Yeager "Biblical Exegesis" 94

<sup>190</sup> Nicholson 452

<sup>191</sup> Douglas 452

<sup>192</sup> Butler 3

pierced bodies gush “as goteres [gutters] they runne.”<sup>193</sup> There can be no “inside” for a Jewish body that is not always available for Christian Romans, and Christian readers; these insides are both nowhere and everywhere, spread out upon the terrain of the narrative.

Yet I would argue that the *Siege*'s eviscerations are more complicated than typical anti-Jewish fantasies. The opened bodies here evoke a real sense of the permeability of inside(r) and outside(r) status, akin to the permeability of the skin upon which those identities are reinforced. The ambiguities of Caiaphas' ruptured body are telling and instructive; the scene provides an example of the kind of identity mobilities to which corporeal violence in the *Siege* responds, attempts to contain, and ultimately facilitates. While the poem does, in Nicholson's words, “quasi-ritually ejec[t]” the “defiling” position of Jew “from its symbolic system,” I suggest that the repetition of that ejection – Jewish bodies literally projected over and over, opened again and again, their surfaces replicating – suggests that the process of identity formation is not a stable one, but rather a process that must be re-enacted again and again in order to rearticulate boundaries – of self, of skin – that are prone to wander.<sup>194</sup> I will show that the *Siege* seems preoccupied with this permeability of identity boundaries, as suggested by its context within a conversion narrative – conversion from Roman pagan to Christian nation – and by its materialization of those conversions upon flesh. In the next section, I will outline the founding of Christian identity in the poem, the conversion scenes in which Christian identities, and bodies, are “made.” These conversion scenes set the terms of identity mobility, circulation, or *mouvance*, that I will trace in subsequent scenes of reversion, renewed disease, and recession.

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<sup>193</sup> line 564

<sup>194</sup> Nicholson 479

## Conversion Proximities

The *Siege* highlights the proximity of Christian identities with those outside its borders from its outset: as pagan Romans – Vespasian and Titus – convert to Christian believers, readers glimpse a reenactment of the historical movement of Christendom, as pagan outsiders convert to Christian insiders. Significant to this discussion is the corporeal inscription of that conversion. Before his conversion, Titus suffers from “a malady unmake inmyddis the face:/ The lyppe lyth on a lumpe, lyvered on the cheke;/ So a canker unclene hit chloched togedres.”<sup>195</sup> Vespasian’s flesh is also afflicted with wasps that have hived on his head. Certainly, on the one hand, these bodily ailments reflect a sort of generic spiritual unwholesomeness, the dysfunction of unbelief and its physical manifestation upon any body outside Christendom. At the same time, however, the text also explicitly refers to these afflictions as “grym sores,” their bodies as diseased, and Vespasian’s body, though afflicted with swarming wasps, specifically as “leper-like.”<sup>196</sup> Vespasian is so debilitated by his wasps that he is rendered immobile and is transported on a litter.<sup>197</sup> These particular varieties of bodily disease, especially his affiliation with leprosy, suggest a connection with the kinds of polluted, degenerate, and static or intractable bodies specifically associated with Jewish abject physicality, as discussed above. Here, Jewish embodiment is displaced onto pagan bodies. As soon as Titus and Vespasian believe, their bodies also convert to explicitly “clean,” whole, pure Christian bodies, as if they were “never...wemmyd [blemished].”<sup>198</sup> Titus and Vespasian’s conversion seems ultimately to reenact the historical movement from Judaism (alongside pagan Roman) to Christianity – from leper-like, diseased immobility to clean, whole virtue, or, in Pauline terms, from

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<sup>195</sup> lines 30-2. [a cruel malady amidst [his] face:/ His lip lay on a lump, clotted on the cheek;/ As a canker unclean it clenched [his lips] together.]

<sup>196</sup> lines 42, 38, 256

<sup>197</sup> line 38

<sup>198</sup> lines 178, 180, 256

“death” to “life”, from “old man” to “new.”<sup>199</sup>

Here, at the start of the narrative, Titus and Vespasian’s conversion accounts work to highlight the constructed nature of Christianity, pointing up the rhetorical and symbolic performances that must take place to, as Jerome puts it, “make” a Christian individual, as well as a Christian king. Titus is, in fact, explicitly “made...Cristen kyng that for Crist werred” when he is immediately baptized after conversion.<sup>200</sup> They also reinforce corporeal surface as the exteriorization of religious and political identity and invite the reader to engage in a kind of corporeal hermeneutic, reading bodies to determine their movable identification. These conversion scenes point to both the proximities and the distinctions between Jewish and Christian identity positions, as Christian is contingent upon, and proceeds from, Jew. Conversion works to both reveal and to elide these connections in a hermeneutic of the body, and of embodied identity, that is always ambivalent. That is, it is impossible to finally determine whether these converted bodies materialize identitarian (and theological) disjunct or continuity, supercession or contiguous flow.

The movement in these conversion scenes is not only spiritual, but historical and political, reenacting the historical trajectory from a pagan Roman past to a national Christian present and future. And this movement shows that Roman can be as contested and shifting an identificatory category as Jew. In response to first hearing the gospel, Titus lays the blame for Christ’s crucifixion not on Jerusalem’s inhabitants but on Rome’s: “‘A, Rome renayed!’ quod the kyng. ‘The riche emperour,/ Cesar, sinful wrecche, that sent hym fram Rome,/ Why nadde thy lycam be leyd low under

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<sup>199</sup> For Pauline theology of this spiritual movement, see Romans 2-5, 7:6, 8:2-27; Galatians 2:14-21, 4:22-31, 5:16-25; Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Corinthians 3:6-8. Kruger compellingly maintains that this spiritual and historical progression is symbolically reenacted in all conversion narratives (see, for example, *Spectral Jew*, 77-8).

<sup>200</sup> lines 193-4

erthe/ Whan Pilat provost was made suche a prince to jugge?”<sup>201</sup> It is perhaps significant that it is Nero and his senators (and not any Christian authority) who determine to send Vespasian and Titus, newly Christianized, to Jerusalem to avenge Christ’s death, in a stanza that reinforces Nero’s underlying motivation to exact tribute from the Jews, who aren’t paying. Originating the exclusively anti-Jewish polemic with Nero makes this anti-Jew position suspect, as Nero clearly has ulterior, economic motivations and is presented as the ultimate man of corruption. The ultimate blame for Christ’s death lies with poor administration, it seems, and corrupt leadership, rather than with intractable Jews. While Christian knights do not explicitly enact this revenge fantasy on corrupt and pagan Romans, Nero and Pilate, as well as a series of corrupt emperors, experience divine retribution – in each case, an explicit opening up of their bodily surfaces – with a gruesomeness that echoes the corporeal judgment visited upon the *Siege’s* Jews. Nero impales himself, his body is “to-clef,” with a pole that he has sharpened with his own teeth<sup>202</sup>; a second corrupt emperor, Vitellius, is drawn and gored so that “his guttes alle/ As a boweled beste into his breche felle./ Doun yermade he yede and yeldeth the soule,/ And they kayght the cors and kast into Tybre”<sup>203</sup>; Pilate also stabs himself, dying “as his kynde, corsedlich.”<sup>204</sup>

These “cursed” deaths respond to the Romans’ unrepentant natures, their “kynde,” whereas Titus and Vespasian are explicitly remade into “Cristen king[s].”<sup>205</sup> Vespasian explicitly announces this shift from pagan Roman past to Christian national future when he renounces Nero’s initial financial motivation for vengeance against Jerusalem and baptizes it a Christian one, saying that on their new spiritual quest, “Hit

<sup>201</sup>lines 173-6. [“Ah, traitorous Rome!” said the king. “The rich emperor,/ Caesar, sinful wretch, that sent him from Rome,/ Why had not your [Caesar’s] body been laid low under the earth/ When Pilate the provost was made such a prince to judge?”]

<sup>202</sup> lines 913-20

<sup>203</sup> lines 944-48. [all his guts/ as a disemboweled beast into his breeches fell./ Down screaming he went and yields [his] soul,/ And they caught the corpse and cast it into the Tiber.]

<sup>204</sup> lines 1333-4

<sup>205</sup> line 194

nedith nought at this note of Nero to mynde.”<sup>206</sup> Indeed, as the narrative progresses, the distinctions between violent, corrupt, and secular Rome and Vespasian and Titus’ new, Christian Rome only increase. Interestingly, when Peter enters a pre-conversion Roman temple with the Veronica’s veil, the text portrays that pagan space with specifically Muslim imagery: “The mahound and the mametes to-mortled to peces and al to-crased as the cloth through the kirke passed.”<sup>207</sup> Further, while Vespasian explicitly renounces Nero’s quarrel with the Jews, “That querel Y quick-cleyme [renounce]” (in fact, he renounces the claims of all kings, “save of Crist [alone]”), he insists that Rome itself, “by resoun,” retains the supreme rule on earth, “And lordschip of eche londe that lithe under Heven.”<sup>208</sup> This kind of shift in allegiance from human authority to Christ’s authority, as manifested through Rome, sets the stage for a Christianized Rome to continue to assert imperial, and now also spiritual, authority. Thus, when Vespasian is finally elected emperor, it is a new, Christianized Rome that he inaugurates. Thus the symbolic history represented in the conversion scenes is two-fold; Christian identity emerges in a seemingly Hegelian dialectic of progress from a Jewish and Roman pagan past.<sup>209</sup> Yet while exegetical readings of the poem figure Rome as a literal spiritually dysfunctional place, Rome is also positioned as the inheritor of primacy in the spiritual history of Christendom (and the rightful seat of the Church).<sup>210</sup> Thus, healed and closed bodies enable the coming-into-Being of a national and historic, as well as individual, Christian identity.

The narrative builds upon this hermeneutic of the closed and healed body,

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<sup>206</sup> line 505 [It is not necessary in these circumstances to remember Nero.]

<sup>207</sup> lines 239-40. [The idols of Mohammed crumbled to pieces/ And broke all to bits as the cloth passed through the church.]

<sup>208</sup> See lines 505-12

<sup>209</sup> The text explicitly acknowledges the relevance of history in the battle with the Jews: the Christians’ siege engine is “stoked ful of storijs” (334). While the subject of those histories is not named, the scene’s proximity to the conversions of Titus and Vespasian conjures the specter of both their Jewish and pagan Roman past and brings that past into proximity with their present battle.

<sup>210</sup> See Yeager 81.

initiated in the conversion scenes, in the first battle scene. Again delimiting the ambivalence of the conversion scenes, in this battle only Jews' bodies are dismembered in the fight. While Jewish viscera, and the bloody entrails of their elephants and camels, litter this landscape, the text maintains that the Christians are "as rest as they fram Rome come,/Unriven eche a renk and noght a ryng brosten;/ Was no point perschid of alle here pris armure/ So Crist His knyghtes gan kepe."<sup>211</sup> If the conversion scenes highlight the proximity of Christian and Jewish identifications across somatic surfaces, the text here reinforces their distinctions: the wholeness of the Christian body and its inability to be pierced or fragmented against the Jewish body which cannot hold together.

### **Wide Open**

So far, I have traced a bodily hermeneutic in the *Siege* that seems to support the kind of univocal anti-Semitism critics read into the poem: Jews' bodies are dismembered in an abject response to Christian wholeness, a negative affirmation of Christian virtue. Jews, along with pagan Romans, provide the obsolete past from which Christian history emerges clean and triumphant. Yet, I have also suggested that the narrative evinces an ambiguity about these bodies and the identities they materialize that is not fully settled; as bodies are opened, as we have seen across Caiaphas' body, the limits of embodied identities begin to flow and commingle. As the narrative progresses, I would like to argue that Jewish and Christian identities seem continually to lose their distinctive qualities, as manifested upon their flesh. Violent abjection works in response to this identitarian mobility – to heal identitarian rupture – yet it only results in further subjective circulation.

In the founding violent moment of the story, prompting all others, stands

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<sup>211</sup> lines 609-12. [Yet were the Romans as well-rested as when they came from Rome,/ Each man was unharmed and not a ring broken;/ No point of all their prize armor was pierced:/ So Christ kept his knyghts until compline time.]

Christ's tortured body. While *Titus and Vespasian* shields its readers' eyes from any of the violence attending the crucifixion, with a soothing "love berst Jesu Cristes hert,/ And noon opur pynes smert,"<sup>212</sup> the *Siege* figures Christ's death in gory detail. There, after being whipped, his body "on rede blode ran, as rayn in the street" until, finally, on the cross, "Hys veynys brosten" and he dies.<sup>213</sup> These two images – copiously flowing blood and "bursting" bodies, their insides flung outward – set the terms for the treatment of bodies through the rest of the poem. The word "brosten" and its variants repeats insistently describing the trajectories of human, animal and civic bodies: "brosten" appears four times in one seventy-line battle sequence alone; nine times in the 1340 lines of the poem.<sup>214</sup> For example, Judas' body, like Christ's, bursts in death; Jews' camels and lances "brosten"; Jewish brains burst out, and so does Sir Sabyn's, which "out brast at both nosethrylles [nostrils]"<sup>215</sup> While the similarities between Christ's tortured body and Jews' may suggest an idea of just retribution, my point, as in Caiaphas' execution above, is that the similarity required for retribution also brings Christ's and Jews' bodies into the kind of identificatory proximity that begins to elide the corporeal, and identitarian, differences that violent retribution seeks to reify.

Those identitarian differences seem to converge as soon as the end of the first days' fight. The Jews having sustained heavy losses, the text describes both Jews and Christians as seemingly indistinguishable in their preparations for battle. Both groups are able warriors and seem equally matched in hardy, earnest effort. Though their losses number "an hundred thousand helmes," the men in Jerusalem "wynnen up whyghtly the walles to kepe,/ Frasche, unfounded folke, and grete defence made."<sup>216</sup>

The Romans likewise fortify their siege engines: they are, like the Jews, brave and

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<sup>212</sup> *Titus and Vespasian* 437-8

<sup>213</sup> lines 12, 20

<sup>214</sup> lines 537-610

<sup>215</sup> lines 156; 537, 573; 1203

<sup>216</sup> lines 621-2. [They struggle bravely to defend the walls,/ Fresh, untried folk, and great defense made]

“hardy men upon hyghte,” apt and single-minded in their purpose.<sup>217</sup> Jews and Christians look similar, their towers – on siege engines and war elephants – are similarly decorated with gold, carbuncles, and expensive cloth.<sup>218</sup> In contrast, *Titus and Vespasian* insists repeatedly on the differences between Jerusalem’s inhabitants and the Christians outside, writing “Withinne þei maden sorwe and care;/ Withouten, joye and mychell fare./ Withinne her handes þei gan wrynge;/ And þei withouten loude synge.”<sup>219</sup> While *Titus and Vespasian* highlights these differences as symptomatic of spiritual chosenness or destined punishment, the *Siege* chooses to present each camp using similar images.

Further, Jews and Christians engage in mutually recognizable, reciprocal war tactics. For example, to give the impression that Jerusalem’s thirsty inhabitants enjoyed plentiful water, Josephus instructs them to dredge their clothing in the city’s polluted drinking water – water polluted by Christians – and hang the wet clothing along the walls where the Christians might see them.<sup>220</sup> While Vespasian is not fooled by the ruse, what is interesting about this scene is that the text does not present Josephus’ tactics as Jewish trickery, but rather as a recognizable enactment of wartime strategy. Vespasian “the wile wel ynow knewe” as a “wyles of were,”<sup>221</sup> and the text calls Josephus a “gentyl clerke” and his ploy a “wondere wyle.”<sup>222</sup>

These scenes, taken together, draw attention to the similarities between Jews and Christians as the poem “courts and then resists the breakdown of boundaries between the combatants.”<sup>223</sup> As Millar has noted, these descriptions of the Jews are devoid of the kind of invective associated with other anti-Semitic texts.<sup>224</sup> Rather than

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<sup>217</sup> line 655

<sup>218</sup> lines 325-38; 465-76

<sup>219</sup> *Titus and Vespasian* 2917-20

<sup>220</sup> lines 789-96

<sup>221</sup> lines 797, 800

<sup>222</sup> lines 789, 790

<sup>223</sup> Chism 326

<sup>224</sup> Millar 160-1, 174

manifesting devilish characteristics, attempting to convert Christians, poison their wells, or posing the other kinds of bodily menaces (like blood crimes or cannibalism) commonly associated with anti-Semitic fantasies, these Jews look like Christians as they prepare for battle. As already noted, fantasies of Jewish connection to bodily menace were varied and widespread. In one example, from the 1494 forced confession of Jews of Tyrnau, the uses to which Jews put Christian blood are required by religious practice and by unbridled sexual appetite:

Firstly, they were convinced by the judgment of their ancestors that the blood of a Christian was a good remedy for the alleviation of the wound of circumcision. Secondly, they were of [the] opinion that this blood, put into food, is very efficacious for the awakening of mutual love. Thirdly, they had discovered, as men and women among them suffered equally from menstruation, that the blood of a Christian is a specific medicine for it, when drunk. Fourthly, they had an ancient but secret ordinance by which they are under obligation to shed Christian blood in honor of God in daily sacrifices in some spot or other.<sup>225</sup>

It is worth reiterating that this kind of activity or appetite is never associated with Jews in the *Siege*, and it makes any recognizable similarity between Jews and Christians, as appears in these scenes, all the more striking. In the *Siege*, as Christians and Jews perform and appear similarly in these battle scenes, war seems to conflate identities as often as it distinguishes them. While acting similarly may not seem to carry a latent identity threat, Bernard, for one, seems to assume the potential for identity convergence inherent within looking and acting like the Other. Cautioning Christian money-lenders against engaging in activity usually associated with Jews, he maintains that they are “out-Jewing Jews and behaving even more “jewishly” than Jewish

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<sup>225</sup> qtd in Trachtenberg 149; see also Kruger 82-3.

usurers. Going so far as to call them “baptized Jews” Bernard’s comments suggest a kind of permeable identity, in which Christians could become virtual Jews by adopting Jewish behavior.<sup>226</sup>

Interestingly, it is following, and I would argue in response to, this narrative moment in which identities threaten to become indistinguishable through the enactment of war – in which preparations, and implements, and activities reverberate in proximity – that some of the most graphic violence of the poem erupts: Caiaphas’ and his men are violently tortured. If Jew and Christian look alike in their enactments of war in the *Siege*, the corporeal violence enacted across Caiaphas’ skin serves to reaffirm fantasies of grotesque Jewish embodiment, of physical openness and ultimate Jewish abjection and expulsion. At the same time, however, I have already argued that the overdetermined image of Caiaphas’ body – skinned, hung, attacked by animals, anointed with honey, sides pierced – unleashes a series of associations both disciplinary and sanctified that finally reinforces only an incessant reverberation, or suspension, between Jewish and Christian identifications. Chism has further argued that the sheer force of violence directed at Caiaphas, as Christians perform their alienating retribution, threatens to link Christian performance with the bestial stereotypes of Jews or with the poem’s own depiction of Nero’s irrational violence.<sup>227</sup> This moment brings to mind Mills’ point that scenes of hanging and flaying can often display figures suspended between sympathy and punishment, and, I would add, suspended between divergent identifications: between transgressor and transgressed, between blight and cure (as, I will show, literally happens later in the narrative).

Further, that these bodies are consistently presented as visual objects contributes to these reverberations. According to Roger Bacon’s thirteenth-century

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<sup>226</sup> qtd in Jeremy Cohen 224-5

<sup>227</sup> Chism 332

visual theory, vision “always experiences a feeling that is a kind of pain” as we are moved physically and emotionally by what we see.<sup>228</sup> Mills argues that such vision theories “trouble distinctions between subject and object, and in turn problematize the identities around which these distinctions turn.”<sup>229</sup> In fact, the narrative proximity between Caiaphas’ skinning and Vespasian’s arming manifests this troubled subjective distinction: Vespasian’s breastplate, “clene gold,” gems and pearls call to mind the breastplate, gold, gems and pearls that Caiaphas wore when last he was clothed.<sup>230</sup> The taking apart and putting together of both men materializes identitarian movements that flow throughout the narrative. These scenes – the performance of war, skinning, arming – simultaneously highlight the separation, of Vespasian and Caiaphas, Jew and Christian, and also suggest that these positions are rather two sides of the same identity coin. If Christian identity manifests a theological and historical supercession, then these scenes suggest that supercession carries with it repetition, resemblance, and a kind of mutual interlacing of identification.

In perhaps one of the more telling examples of permeable identifications in the *Siege*, it is Christians, not Jews, who perform the grotesque corporeal threat to embodiment particularly associated with Jewish physicality. While in *Titus and Vespasian*, it is exclusively Jews who are killing and eating each other, the *Siege* text maintains that Christians:

Dommyn the ditches [of Jerusalem] with the ded corsen,  
 Crammen hit myd karayn the kirlens alle under,  
 That the styngk of the stewe myght strike over the walles  
 To cothe the corsed folke that hem kepe schole.  
 The cors of the condit that comen to toun

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<sup>228</sup> Bacon 445-6; see also Biernoff 96; Mills 19.

<sup>229</sup> Mills 19

<sup>230</sup> see lines 473-6; 745-64

Stoppen, evereche a stroom, ther any strande yede,  
With stockes and stones and stynkande bestes,  
That they no water myght wynne that weren enclosed.<sup>231</sup>

Here, Christians pollute Jerusalem's water supply in a direct performance of stereotypical Jewish threat. Even further, after killing Caiaphas and his band, Vespasian orders his men to burn their bodies, then "alle abrod on the burwe blowen the powdere/ 'Ther is doust for your drynke!' adoun to hem crieth,/ And bidde hem bible of that broth for the bischop soule."<sup>232</sup> This incident that hedges on forced mass cannibalism echoes and inverts the more well-known scene in which a starving Jewish mother roasts and eats her child. Here, however, cannibalism is ordered as the just punishment for Caiaphas' treachery. In fact, Christians in the *Siege* are responsible for nearly all the crimes usually charged to the Jews: forced cannibalism, poisoning water sources, infecting bodies, corporeal fragmentation and destruction.<sup>233</sup> Millar and Van Court, among others, have argued that the *Siege* evokes sympathy for Jews, rather than reiterating a univocal anti-Semitism; and it is these moments of specific Christian threat to bodiliness that can be sited as provoking that sympathy.<sup>234</sup> Yet, in a narrative context framed by conversion, a movement from Jewish past to Christian present, and in which the body provides the signifying terrain marking that spiritual and historical movement, this enactment of a threatening corporeality stereotypically linked to the hermeneutic Jew would seem to perform a conflation of or circulation between Jewish and Christian identities. Kruger's comments on the identitarian slippages inherent in

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<sup>231</sup> lines 685-92. [Then [they] choke the ditches with the dead bodies,/ Cram it with carrion beneath all the battlements,/ So that the stench from that stew (combination) might strike over the walls [of the city]/ To infect the cursed folk (i.e. the living Jews) that should defend them (i.e. their fallen dead)./ The course of the canal that comes to the town/ [They] stop, every stream, where any current went,/ With sticks and stones and stinking [dead] beasts,/ That they who were enclosed might obtain no water.]

<sup>232</sup> lines 722-24. [all across on the town to blow the powdere (the ashes):/ 'There is dust for your drink!' down to them (Jerusalem's inhabitants) [he] cries,/ And bids them imbibe of that broth for the bishop's soul.]

<sup>233</sup> see also Chism 319

<sup>234</sup> Millar 161, 220; Van Court 235

images of conversion is instructive here:

Christian interest in Judaism is...consistently shadowed by the fear that such interest might lead in 'Judaizing' directions, and we should therefore not be surprised that moments of interreligious interest and collaboration also often entail interreligious hostility.<sup>235</sup>

These identitarian shifts and their attending violence is the pattern that I see in the *Siege*.

What happens to a static Christian identity, even the concept of identitarian fixity, in the presence of these narrative moments in which Jew and Christian are representationally equalized and perform like each other (or enact stereotypes of each other), in a text that purports to tell about historical and theological – and communal and individual identity – making? The narrative only provides more corporeal undoing, unmaking. Only a few lines after Christians torture, burn, and blow Caiaphas' body across the noses and mouths of Jerusalem's inhabitants, Vespasian himself is wounded "wonderlich sore" as a dart pierces through his shoe, through his foot, and into his horse's side.<sup>236</sup> I read this moment as further dismantling a static, whole Christian embodiment. The poem has already set out a hermeneutic of bodies in which wounding and disease signals spiritual un-health or divine punishment, while virtuous bodies are whole, clean, and healthy. Yet here, Vespasian loses his explicit mark as "Christ's knight," as his wounded body is aligned with the pierced bodies of Jews and their animals and their city walls that have, to this point, signaled their justified supercession.

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<sup>235</sup> *Spectral Jew*, 132-3. For Kruger's full discussion, see especially his chapter, "Merchants, Converts, Jews."

<sup>236</sup> lines 815-18. "Waspasian wounded was ther wonderlich sore/ Throw the hard of the hele with an hande-darte/ That boot throw the bote and the bone nayled/ Of the frytted fote in the folis side." [Vespasian was wounded there very badly/ Through the bone of the heel with a hand-dart/ That bit through the boot and nailed the bone/ Of the leather-wrapped foot into the horse's side.]

It has been suggested that this wounding carries stigmatic associations and would be an affirmation of Vespasian's Christian identity, not an undoing of it. Certainly, the use of the word "nayed" evokes crucifixion imagery, as well as the pierced foot and side (of the horse). However, I resist a univalent stigmatic reading of this scene, in part because of the clear hermeneutic of wounded and wasted bodies consistent throughout the poem, and in part because I know of no cases where a holy person receives the stigmata at the hands of an enemy. Yet, I am also drawn to the final undecidability of this image – deploying as it does valences both sanctified and condemned – as it contributes to my argument that the *Siege's* flowing bodies are ultimately an ambiguous terrain of identification. If Christians are "made" and the outward sign of that making is corporeal wholeness, then the text suggests that Christians are "unmade" in their corporeal rupture. Significantly, it is not just Vespasian, but all the Christian fighters are, from this point, vulnerable to injury: Christians in the following lines are "forbeten and bled...wounded ful sore,"<sup>237</sup> so that the text says they would rather have doctors than continue fighting.<sup>238</sup> Thus, Vespasian's wounding is symbolically significant as it aligns him with both medieval fantasies of Jewish corporeal openness and with the specific Jews of this narrative. His wounded body also echoes his own spiritually and physically dysfunctional (and specifically immobile) pre-conversion body. That is, as his body is opened and flows, so the identification guaranteed along his formerly unruptured skin begins to flow and circulate across multiple and ambiguous affiliations, Christian and Jew, Christ and anti-Christ.

I am attempting to trace the trajectory of excessive and diffuse corporeal identifications in this poem, and so far it seems that the most violent abjection of

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<sup>237</sup> lines 846, 848

<sup>238</sup> line 844

Jewish bodies occurs as a narrative response to destabilized Christian identities. Caiaphas' torture unfolds in response to the equalization of Jewish and Christian identities on the battlefield, as they approach mutual identification. Likewise Vespasian's wounding, in which a flow across spiritual and corporeal histories/identities is opened, precipitates some of the most graphically violent episodes of the poem. In response to his wounding, a Jewish fighter is struck so hard with a rock that the "gretter pese of the panne the pyble forth striketh,/ That hit flow into the feld, a forlong or more."<sup>239</sup> In the next stanza, a pregnant woman inside the walls is struck by another stone with such force that "the barn out brayed fram the body clene/ And was born up as a bal over the burwe walles."<sup>240</sup> The text goes on to describe the massive destruction of Jews following Vespasian's wounding in which generalized men "were brayned," "Wymmen wide open walte undere stones," and both the walls of the city and the temple are torn apart.<sup>241</sup>

This Jewish abjection, in which bodies expel their insides, are turned inside out, exploded, and flung across the landscape, is performed in literal response to Vespasian's wounding: the Christians vow to "wreken [avenge] the wounde."<sup>242</sup> Yet, I also maintain that this extreme alienating violence responds to the representational meaning that Vespasian's broken body manifests – the threatened destabilization or perhaps retrogression of Christian identity – and is a narrative strategy to foreclose that corporeal and identity rupture by displacing it across Jewish bodies. This excessive narrative response to threatened identity recalls Kristeva's claim that it is at such moments of subjective ambiguity, when identitarian parameters are blurred, that

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<sup>239</sup> lines 827-8. [the largest piece of the brain was so struck out by that rock,/ That it flew out into the field, a furlong or more]

<sup>240</sup> lines 831-2. [that the child [was] flung out completely from the body/ And was borne up as a ball over the town walls]

<sup>241</sup> lines 833-6

<sup>242</sup> line 820

the abject is deployed.<sup>243</sup> In these moments, “The body’s inside...shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside....Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its ‘own and clean self’.”<sup>244</sup> Likewise, it is precisely at moments of threatened approximation of Christian and Jewish identities that bodies’ insides appear in the *Siege*. Moreover, flung fetuses and brains, like the flayed body and pierced and burst skin throughout, represent, in Mills’ words, “a zone of abjection alongside regions designed to elicit identification.”<sup>245</sup> Their trajectories become the movement of identification itself, a reverberation or suspension between subject and object, between Christian and Jew.

Nowhere in the *Siege* is this identitarian reverberation and being-in-between more evident than in the strange scene of Titus’ second malady, a scene that echoes Vespasian’s wounding above. The text maintains that when Vespasian is elected emperor of a newly Christianized Roman empire:

Titus for the tydyng hath take so mychel joye  
 That in his synwys soudeynly a syknesse is fallen...  
 With a cramp and a colde caught was so hard  
 That the fyngres and feet, fustes and joyntes  
 Was lythy as a leke and lost han here strengthe.  
 He croked agens kynde and as a crepel woxen<sup>246</sup>

Here Titus’ body troubles his Christian identity, tied to his “cleanness,” as that body degenerates into a renewed diseased state, a state that specifically resonates with his pre-conversion dysfunctional body. This body that is “caught” and into which

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<sup>243</sup> Kristeva 4

<sup>244</sup> *ibid* 53

<sup>245</sup> pg 64

<sup>246</sup> lines 1027-8, 1030-33. [And Titus at the news has taken so much joy/ That in his sinews suddenly a sickness is fallen./... With a cramp and a cold was caught so hard/ That his fingers and feet, fists and joints/ Were weak as a leaf and had lost their strength./ He became crooked against nature and as a cripple grew]

sickness has fallen explicitly undermines the conversion identity his healed body materialized: the text insists three times that this body confounds Titus' new spiritual "kynde."<sup>247</sup> Titus' strange joy-induced illness, leaving him as immobile as the Jews in the next stanza, is healed only by the sight of the Jew whom Titus "moste hated."<sup>248</sup> When that hated Jew appears before Titus, "His herte in an hote yre so hetterly riseth/ That the blode bygan with the hete to brede in the vaynes,/ And the synwes resorte in here self kynde."<sup>249</sup> Like Titus' first conversion, this scene even more explicitly illustrates both the constructed as well as the permeable nature of Christianity; the ease with which Titus is "unmade" suggests the fragility of his bodily, and spiritual, identity. Further, this scene materializes the symbolically abject Jewish body as the identity literally both hated and necessary for a stabilized Christian identity, or at least for Christian identity's exterior sign of wholeness. Titus' second healing illustrates the recuperative power for the Christian body of "carefully administered" and "rehabilitative" hatred of Jews, which Chism maintains is part of the project of the whole text.<sup>250</sup> This recuperative anger makes Christians literally dependent upon Jews to retain their proper natures.

Titus' second illness and healing illustrate Kruger's idea of the spectral Jew, in which Jewish presence, never obliterated, is conjured up in order to be conjured away, reifying Christian identity in the process.<sup>251</sup> Likewise, Titus' Jewish enemy, the one whose marginalized presence is necessary for the maintenance of Titus' corporeal and symbolic spiritual health, returns "as he come" at the end of the scene.<sup>252</sup> Further, this

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<sup>247</sup> lines 1033, 1052, 1054

<sup>248</sup> line 1047

<sup>249</sup> lines 1050-53. [His heart in a hot anger so quickly rose/ That the blood began to spread in his veins as a result of the heat,/ And his sinews [began to] resort to their proper nature.] For the medieval medical theory surrounding this healing, see chapter 3 of Citrome's *The Surgeon in Medieval English Literature*, "Surgery as Salvation: *The Siege of Jerusalem*."

<sup>250</sup> Chism 329, 330

<sup>251</sup> Kruger, *Spectral Jews*, 10-11

<sup>252</sup> line 1066

scene illustrates the suspended nature of both Jew and Christian identity: Jewish identity, like the text's other flows of blood and broken bodies, is both illness and cure, both spiritual origin and spiritual detour, while Christian identity flows between past and present, in a conversion state that keeps on turning, reverberating, circulating.<sup>253</sup> I read this kind of interconnection and circulation of Jewish and Christian identities as more proximate than merely a hated, though necessary, Other, or even the Other Within. If, according to Nancy, there is no Other against Being, no alien "or an other in general as the essential stranger who is opposed to what is proper," what is left is an other that is like the other side of a multiple Being, like "one of the two," an other that is part of what Nancy calls the "we" of Being.<sup>254</sup> The *Siege* seems to evince this kind of model of being, in which being and other no longer retain their discrete parameters, but intermingle and embrace, turn and return.

One might argue that the *Siege of Jerusalem* forecloses this potentiality for Being-with by affirming the spectrality of the embodied Jewish identity. And certainly, as the siege draws on, Jewish bodies literally become spectral. Their bodies grow lean, pale, and as transparent as "lanterne-hornes."<sup>255</sup> By the time the siege is finally over, the text describes their emaciation in striking terms:

Was nought on ladies lafte bot the lene bones  
 That were fleschy byfore and fayre on to loke;  
 Burges with balies as barels or that tyme  
 No gretter than a grehounde to grype on the medil.<sup>256</sup>

This passage, full of pathos, is interesting in its play upon the images of Jewish

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<sup>253</sup> See Citrome for his discussion of the many instances of a cure by contraries which runs throughout the *Siege*.

<sup>254</sup> *Being Singular Plural*, 11

<sup>255</sup> lines 1147, 1150

<sup>256</sup> lines 1249-52. [(There) was nothing left on ladies but the lean bones/ That were fleshy before and fair to look upon;/ Burghers with bellies like barrels before that time/ (Were now) No bigger than a greyhound to grip around the middle.]

embodiment already presented in the poem. On the one hand, these Jews are humanized: they are not the “faithless” Jews of earlier passages, but are simply medieval ladies and burghers who have suffered in the cruel machinations of war. These humanized, yet emaciated, bodies are distanced from the images of threatening embodiment that have accompanied Jews in this poem and elsewhere. On the other hand, perhaps emaciated bodies, skeletal and ghost-like, participate in a kind of grotesque, uncanny embodiment that continues to link them with anti-Semitic fantasies of Judaism. What is interesting to note is that, as elsewhere in the *Siege*, the sign of their supercession is written upon the Jews’ bodies; once robust, they are now powerless and barely present at all.<sup>257</sup>

In addition to this spectrality, it may be difficult to make an argument for the finality of intertwined identification in the *Siege*, when the narrative ends as one might expect: Jerusalem’s inhabitants finally surrender their ghostly bodies. Titus then sells them across Christendom, thirty for a penny, to “Alle that here bodyes wol by or bargaynes make”<sup>258</sup> in a crass final inversion of Christ’s betrayal. They are silenced, vanquished, their bodies wasted, transparent and literally turned into market commodities as Titus sells the remaining Jews. This final dispersal would seem to replicate the Augustinian injunction for a Jewish presence among Christian communities as both living witnesses of Christocentric scriptural prophesy and Christian historical and theological supercession. And yet I would like to respond by pointing out two other textual moments that evince another mode of response to these identity circulations at play in the *Siege*, beyond spectrality and beyond supercession,

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<sup>257</sup> Kruger’s discussion of the spectrality of Judaism as a strategy of Christian self-formation is instructive here. Commenting on the performative function of Christian historical thinking, he writes: “though Judaism survives, the new temporal scheme that Christianity puts in place attempts to settle it as past, ‘conjure’ it away, provide it once and for all with its ‘death certificate’...But the very act of conjuration suggests that the hoped-for effect of the performative does not in fact pertain, that Jews and Judaism are not fully past, but rather still disturbing and disruptive – ‘haunting’ – enough to Christianity’s sense of its own hegemony to necessitate the act of conjuration” (10-11).

<sup>258</sup> line 1315

other images of Being-with or of identity as indefinite horizon.

The first example comes not from the alliterative *Siege of Jerusalem*, but from the Neville of Hornby Hours, which includes the only visual representation of the *Siege* contemporary with its production.<sup>259</sup> On a full leaf, the graphically detailed image depicts the brutal horrors of the battle, centering on the city of Jerusalem itself. Jerusalem's walls mark the parameters of the action, across and within its borders every body is pierced and bleeding, severed limbs and heads fall to the ground, and two women are shown in the act of devouring their babies. This violence seems to leave a specifically punitive mark on Jewish bodies: each Jewish forehead is depicted with a bloody smear, recalling Cain's mark of alienation. However, Christians, too, are pierced, bleeding, and lie dead at the bottom of the page; and at least two Christian knights have also received the bloody mark. The overall impression of the scene continues the kind of corporeal positionality I've described in the *Siege of Jerusalem*: bodies pressed into a kind of similar flowing, similar disintegration.

Most striking to me in this scene of carnage, is the serene appearance of the manuscript's patron, Isabel de Byron, at the top of the image. She is specifically situated within Jerusalem's walls, surrounded, yet untouched by, its violent action. Kathryn Smith has argued that she here assumes the position of the God of Love in images of "castles of love," both above and sanctioning the events below.<sup>260</sup> Galloway agrees, and interprets her position here as both charitable towards Jews and accepting divine punishment meted out below her.<sup>261</sup> Yet alongside these interpretations, I also wonder if her presence within the walls, within the action of the narrative, works on another level to continue the approximations between embodied identities initiated in the body of the narrative itself. She is both above and simultaneously, ambiguously *a*

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<sup>259</sup> The British Library has a full color reproduction of this leaf, found in Egerton 2781, f. 190, at <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=11624>

<sup>260</sup> See Smith 136-9.

<sup>261</sup> See Galloway's (unpublished) "Alliterative Poetry in Old Jerusalem" (2).

*part of*, the struggle between Christian and Jew figured on the page. And if her posture is devotional, as Yeager argues the siege story functioned in medieval Christian liturgy, that devotional posture only continues the ambiguous identifications between the Jew and the Christian, in which Jew can figure the Christian soul and the Christian imagines herself a virtual Jew. Further, the images that occupy the manuscript's folios immediately before and after this leaf, continue the ambiguous representations of identification associated with this narrative, as white-robed converts on the page before<sup>262</sup> are depicted again, interchangeably, as vanquished Jews on the folio after.<sup>263</sup> What I am arguing here is that these images visually replicate the kind of identitarian ambiguity and mobility to which I have pointed in the *Siege of Jerusalem*. They suggest that the narrative occupies a troubled identitarian terrain, in which proximities – of opened flesh, of affiliation – create the possibility of circulating flows across those ruptures.

One final moment of commingled and embodied identification ends the narrative proper. The death of Sabinus, Vespasian's kinsman and counselor, occurs in the final surge of the battle, and his death is instructive as it links him with the Jewish abjected bodies described above. As Sabinus fights furiously on Jerusalem's wall, he is hit with "an unhende dynte/ That the brayn out brast at both nosethrylles./ And Sabyn, ded of the dynt, into the diche falleth."<sup>264</sup> Sabinus' particularly violent, gruesome death links him with the abjected Jews of the poem. His body, expelling its insides, performs the kind of boundary transgression that mark the deaths of Caiaphas, the pregnant Jewish woman, and many other unnamed Jews in the *Siege* whose veins are burst and whose brains are flung across the battlefield.

Significantly, Sabinus' body explicitly falls into the ditch outside Jerusalem's

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<sup>262</sup> See <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=11623>

<sup>263</sup> See <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=11625>

<sup>264</sup> lines 1202-4. [...a hideous blow/ So that the brain burst out at both nostrils./ And Sabin, dead from the blow, falls into the ditch.]

walls, the same ditch into which the inhabitants of the city have thrown countless transparent Jews, and into which one hundred more Jews fall as Titus avenges Sabinus' death.<sup>265</sup> This is the ditch into which the rotting corpses of slain Jews were “dommyn [choked]” and “crammen” to infect the nostrils of Jerusalem's inhabitants.<sup>266</sup> Jerusalem's ditch is one of the central sites of abjection in the poem; that Sabinus now lies there creates an abject space in which Jewish and Christian corpses are piled up in a *mélange* of bodies indistinguishable one from the other. This moment may illustrate what Chism and others have called the poet's criticism of the violence of war. Yet I would also like to read this poignant scene, the final battle scene of the poem, as a telling moment of intertwined, interchangeable bodies reinforcing the commingled identities those bodies have materialized throughout the narrative.

In this study I have attempted to provide an account, to trace the representational force, of the excessive corporeal surfaces of the *Siege of Jerusalem* and the identitarian terrains they manifest. While the narrative's somatic rupture is most often read as an instrument of the most extreme anti-Semitism in the alliterative tradition, I have suggested in this chapter that the deployment of violently opened bodies functions in a more complex mode than simply, or only, as a tool of univocal anti-Semitism. Rather, violence upon bodies works in the *Siege* at the site, or as the site, of anxieties about Christian and Jewish identities that threaten to destabilize and conflate as the narrative progresses. It is this identity destabilization that violence works to suture, yet the *Siege* suggests that ruptured corporeal surfaces only permit the continued confluence of identifications across those ruptured somatic planes.

Ultimately, I maintain that the *Siege of Jerusalem* presents a landscape across

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<sup>265</sup> see lines 1211-12

<sup>266</sup> lines 685-6

which identities can never retain a solid knowability, or an *a priori* givenness. Neither Jew nor Christian exists distinct from its alien other. “Jew” and “Christian” as signifying categories become impossible to finally and concretely define. Rather, identities in the *Siege* perform transactionally, brought into a proximity that allows their ruptures to initiate a commingling flow. Identities are mobile here, following the trajectory of the bodies and the somatic surfaces across which they materialize. Consequently, these identities require repeated, and in this case violent, rearticulation for reaffirmation of skin and self that does not retain a specifiable horizon. This identitarian circulation presents a medieval model of conversion – or historical and theological progression – that reverberates across many forms of identity and suggests a medieval model of being that can only be understood as existing in the spaces of its own rupture, in the movement between and across self and other.

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## CHAPTER 4

### Remembering Emelye

“Of course there are organized writers, people who always write on schedule and always know what to read, whose finished projects are, clearly, expanded versions of their initial proposals and not surprising diversions; people for whom writing is work (perhaps pleasant, perhaps painful) and not, to use Maurice Blanchot’s expression, worklessness or unworking (*désœuvrement*). For the rest of us, the writing process itself breaks apart, departing the conscious, readily accessible levels of memory, leaving only a trace in the text. It is as if the productive unravels the processual; as if making the thing-of-the-book, the work, also unworks the process, the working... The surprise is not that one writes (that one is writing), but that one has written; that a work (or even a body of work) has somehow brought itself into existence while the writer was engaged in anxious distraction. Writing inscribes an admixture of gathering and breakage” (MacKendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory*, 2).

In this study, I have attempted to describe what it means to have a body that carries on its surface the materialization of identity. What the particular somatization of identity can mean in narratives that present the eccentric body for viewing, for reading. And I have argued that the eccentric or excessive narrative corpora comes into view to express a mobile identity position, to express identitarian multiplicity that is beyond the ability of the story’s language to express. Put another way, when the narrative wishes to represent being as plural, when it confronts the inability of identity categories to retain their distinctive boundaries, to retain that separateness that makes them recognizable as distinct identity categories, then the excessive or eccentric body shows up to figure that identity mobility in skin, an en fleshed presentation that is

perhaps more proximate, certainly more viscerally resonant, to enfleshed readers, then and now, than propositional language. The eccentric flesh of the *King of Tars* figures a kind of fleshy origin of being, in which potential racial-religious selves proliferate, at the touch of which flesh all identity positions begin to *con-verso*, *con-vertio*. This eccentric body enfleshes that momentary identity conflation across all the narrative's identitarian thresholds: Christian, Muslim, human, animal, across genders, across the spaces that contain and shape these selves. From this originary identity openness across the excessive somatic surface, I move to the *Siege of Jerusalem*, in which the body made to exceed its boundaries – via extreme somatic rupture – sets into motion a circulation of identification in which it becomes difficult to distinguish Jewish body from Christian. Corporeal rupture, meant to define the abject other in oppositional terms from the integral self, only serves to potentially intermingle selves across identity thresholds. Across the surfaces of the opened body, identification flows and commingles like blood.

I'd like to turn my attention in this final chapter to another body more famous - and certainly more nominally idyllic - than either of these previous figures, that is, Emelye's body as she figures in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Emelye's form is famously imaged as a hyper-eroticized ideal; hers is the perfect body of courtly romance object to which Palamon, Arcite, and a host of observer/readers in the centuries after have been attracted. Less famously, though, and read across her narrative manifestations, Emelye's body loses its idyllic integrity: in Boccaccio's account, she participates in ritual mastectomy and is finally taken apart and distributed in graphic and violent homosocial metaphor. Chaucer re-members her in the *Knight's Tale* only to refigure that dispersal initiated in Boccaccio's version, this time in a single image of violent sexual rupture often sanitized by modern readers. In Shakespeare's recollection, this corporeal

fragmentation is turned inward, as Emelye's self-expression and acknowledgement turns to self-repression and erasure. In this space of disarticulation – of body and of self – Emelye exists on the threshold of what I am describing in this dissertation: she exists as both fragmented and whole, oscillating between being and becoming in each of her various reincarnations.

Recollected in Chaucer's romantic resurrection as well as in countless critical re-memberings almost exclusively as an erotic ideal – she is the erotic gift that keeps on giving – Emelye's dispersed body has called to me over the years as a body in need of protection, in need of some advocate who can speak her partibility, name it, as the place from which her own being might most authentically locate itself. A place of loss to be sure, in which her "self" was exactly what was not allowed to be located anywhere. In this position of literary avenger, I have told the story of her oppression, mapped the mechanisms by which Chaucer, or the Knight or Theseus, vacate the agency of this formerly resistant Amazon warrior, and conscript her self and her body, against her will, in the service of compulsory heterosexuality and homosocial bonding. This kind of study has been, on the one hand, empowering for me as a writer: I am allowed to right a literary injustice 640 years in the making and reiterated in every critical reading which continues to de-voice Emelye. On the other hand, I have begun to be troubled by the implications of continuing to read Emelye as victim, potentially participating in, as Raskolnikov puts it, "lovingly yet masochistically detail[ing] just how badly women and sexual minorities have been treated in history."<sup>267</sup> In telling her story of oppression, exclusively as a story of oppression, I worry that I may repress other ways her story could be told. I worry about participating in the appropriation of Emelye's body as a terrain across which others

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<sup>267</sup> From the introduction to Raskolnikov's syllabus for her graduate course, "The Question of Feminist and Queer Criticism in Premodern Studies," taught Spring 2008.

make meaning, bring themselves into being, in their repeated transhistorical conjuring, remembering, and taking apart.

There are two ways forward from this wondering about how best I can encounter the bodies of the past, and the selves that materialize across them. First, I can examine the space of the rupture, attend to that rupture not as an abyssal negation, but as an opening in which, across which, possibilities for other kinds of being can circulate. That attending has been one goal of this dissertation: to examine spaces of corporeal rupture, or somatic fields of lack, as terrains that open new possibilities for movement, the coming into being of selves-as-plural. Another possibility for attending to Emelye that affirms her as subject and makes a space for her to exist productively requires me to bring myself into proximity with Emelye, across times and texts, to encounter her body with my own enfleshed self. Refusing to be an objective observer, conjurer, I can allow myself to be undone as she is undone, and see what kinds of new beings emerge from bringing our bodies into proximity. This alternate response to Emelye - one of encounter, attending, response - is what I propose in this final chapter. First, as a way of speaking my own past self, creating my own transhistorical touching along the trajectory of my own history, I will revisit my original engagement with Emelye, including below my initial writing about her body as she is remembered in Boccaccio's and Chaucer's versions. Following that, I bring my present self to bear on both my past and Emelye's, in order to suggest a future towards which we both may turn in hope. We start with interiority.

### **The Past is Prologue**

Interiority is not a term that readers historically associate with Emelye, the object of desire in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Arguably the most silent female character in any of the *Canterbury Tales*, Emelye has little room to speak about her own consciousness, identity, or desires, all elements at which readers might point when

looking for evidence of her interior life. Without that inner space, the place in which subjectivity articulates itself to itself, Emelye is generally assumed to exist on the surface of the narrative or at its margins. One branch of critical response reads Emelye as varying incarnations of the female stereotype: she embodies either the feminine promise of love and regeneration, or the typical romance heroine, bound by the conventions of the genre, even “possibly the most mindless heroine in all literature.”<sup>268</sup> Positioned against these readings of Emelye as flat stereotype are more recent readings of Chaucer’s works which have attempted to address and recover the particular ways that women function, speak, and signify in male-centered social and textual regimes. This interpretive context has sustained a focus on Emelye’s social and ideological function, concluding alternatively that Emelye serves as a social, philosophical, or generic ideal.<sup>269</sup> My point is that, while these two camps of interpretation claim radically different hermeneutics, they each ignore the possibility of a distinct subjectivity for Emelye. Critical readings posit Emelye as variously absent, trite, ideal, or symbolic, but never as a subject with her own interiority. Instead, these interpretations insist upon her body – vacated of awareness, desire, and volition – as the signifier and guarantor of the epic romance and the chivalric code that romance both upholds and engenders.

Yet there are distinct moments in the tale when Emelye asserts her own volition and communicates her own interiority separate from these strictures upon female bodies and desires. Far from static and distant, idealized or absent, Emelye occupies a much more complex, and at times proximate, position than most critical interpretations allow. I argue that when Emelye is allowed to speak for herself, her subjectivity, and the semiotic field that is her body, operates outside the traditional

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<sup>268</sup> Eliason 69. See also Donaldson 48-9; Kolve 86-90; Spearing, *The Knight’s Tale*, 11-12.

<sup>269</sup> For example, see Mann 180; Weisl 61.

heteronormative constraints of chivalric romance: she is unruly, powerful, and resistant. Her articulation of that autonomous inner life threatens the precarious masculine dominance in the tale, a dominance required by its chivalric and romantic ethos. In response to this threat, Emelye's interiority must be vacated – voided of its presence and ability to speak about itself – so that Emelye's body might continue to serve as the terrain across which men in the tale communicate and legitimate homosocial culture. It is the particularly violent male gazing upon Emelye's body that attempts to empty her body of its potent interiority and to reappropriate her body for use as the symbolic and erotic goal of the romance in which she figures.

This discussion of Emelye's distinct feminine subject position, tracing the limits of her interiority, requires a return to Chaucer's primary source for the tale: Boccaccio's *Teseida: Delle Nozze d'Emilia*, where Emelye's Amazonian literary history is treated in detail. This history, the specter of which seems to haunt the *Knight's Tale*, sheds light both on the nature of Emelye's Amazonian threat and upon the force of the male characters' response to that threat in Chaucer's tale (I'm thinking of almost every male character in the tale, from Palamon to Theseus to the narrator). As we shall see, Boccaccio's insistence upon his Emilia's Amazon identity, the initial menace it represents, and the narrative and spectral mechanisms of male response to that identity find both resonances and telling absences in Chaucer's reimagining of Emelye. Only when read against Boccaccio's tale does the extent of Emelye's unruly subjectivity surface as she follows her resistant trajectory begun in the *Teseida*. It is in this way I argue that Emelye's subjectivity is manifested in the spaces between Boccaccio's and Chaucer's narratives.

To be sure, some discussions of female subjectivity in Chaucer have come close to the view advanced here. Mark Miller, for instance, claims an ultimate subject position for Emelye, wherein she is a fully actualized individual against whom the

other characters measure their own subjectivity.<sup>270</sup> However, while understanding her as the central subject in the tale, his reading tends to turn Emelye's subjectivity to the service of male positioning, giving readers insight into male subjects as they gaze on this perfected female being. Readers learn about male response – both abjection and authority – but even this most idealized interpretation continues to repress, distance, and ultimately leave unrepresented Emelye's own interiority.

In part, my characterization of Emelye's subjectivity approaches H. Marshall Leicester's analysis of Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*. Leicester argues that Alisoun, like Emelye, effects a femininity that begins to articulate its own interiority outside the confines of male desire.<sup>271</sup> Yet, my approach differs from Leicester's as I maintain that this feminine subjectivity is best visible via literary history – in the interstices between Chaucer and his source. Additionally, Leicester elsewhere reads the *Knight's Tale* as troubled from its margins by the unruly, not fully contained slippage between epic past and romance present; and he analyzes the identities both constructed and sublimated in the representation of the epic within the conventions of romance. Again, however, it is “the chivalric-heroic masculine nature” that his analysis illuminates.<sup>272</sup> The implications for women within a troubled chivalric code, a code that retains elements (but not women) that are “incompletely tamed,” remain relatively unexplored in his reading.<sup>273</sup>

Some critics have acknowledged Emelye's distinct articulation of desires disruptive to social, political, gender, or genre norms; especially useful to my own reading are Hansen, Weisl, and Strauss. Yet each of these readings fails to understand Emelye's iteration of that interiority within the literary context of her Amazon identity, the persistence and repression of which must in part constitute Emelye's

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<sup>270</sup> See Miller.

<sup>271</sup> See Leicester, “Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism,” especially 487-95.

<sup>272</sup> *Disenchanted Self*, 324

<sup>273</sup> See *ibid* 236

subjectivity. Lochrie's treatment of Emelye in *Heterosyncrasies* comes closest to my own as she unfolds the ways in which Emelye embodies what she calls a "female masculinity" stemming directly from her Amazonian past. While she agrees that the Knight's narrative aim is to translate that masculinity and turn it toward heterosexual domestication, she does not address the ways in which Emelye has been conjured across her literary history nor how those re-membering moments contribute to her dynamic literary identity. My project in this analysis returns the question of an effect of subjectivity in Chaucer to a question of his relation to literary antecedents. I suggest that the literary construction of subjectivity charts a domain that is not fully accessible to our dichotomies of gender identity – at least as those have generally appeared in criticism of the *Knight's Tale*. This domain is best visible to us through – and was indeed partially produced by – the relations of literary history, between whose gaps Emelye's marginalized but potent subjectivity emerges.

#### Emelye's Literary Past: Boccaccio's *Teseida*

Of the several sources for the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer drew most extensively on the *Teseida*; Chaucer borrows about eighty percent of the *Knight's Tale*'s lines from Boccaccio's romance epic.<sup>274</sup> While Chaucer abridged many parts of what he took from the twelve books comprising the *Teseida*, Book I represents his most extreme excision of source material: he condenses its 1104 lines to eight lines of introduction in the *Knight's Tale*.<sup>275</sup> Boccaccio's first book treats the establishment of the Amazon nation, their killing of husbands and fathers, and their battle with Teseo and his Greek army, ending with the conquest of the Amazons and the large-scale nuptials between the two groups. It is only when Teseo and his men are forcibly removed from their

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<sup>274</sup> Coleman 88

<sup>275</sup> Coleman, 88.

life of domestic pleasure with the Amazons that the events initiating the rivalry over Emilia unfold.

Boccaccio himself felt obligated to justify the presence of the first book and its exclusive treatment of the Amazonian war in his epic nominally about the love of two young Thebans for Emilia. He explains in a gloss that he includes the detailed story of the battle with Amazons “for no other purpose but to show whence Emilia came to Athens.”<sup>276</sup> He continues that the extended treatment of the Amazon women – whose customs are somewhat foreign “and on that account more pleasing” – clarifies the rest of the story.<sup>277</sup> Thus, Emelye’s Amazon identity is simultaneously disruptive to the surface of the plot, essential to the latent meaning of the story, and a site of narrative pleasure by virtue of its Otherness; according to Boccaccio, at least, readers cannot fully comprehend Boccaccio’s story without this textual history.

Having justified their narrative inclusion, in another gloss Boccaccio describes what he understands about these women called “Amazons”:

The Amazons are women who killed all their males  
and dedicated themselves to warfare and had their right  
breasts cut off because these prevented them from drawing  
their bows; and this is why they are called Amazons, which  
means to say that they are without breasts.<sup>278</sup>

Boccaccio links Amazons with their violent past and devotion to martial skill. Indeed, Boccaccio understands Amazon identity only in terms of their destruction, in killing

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<sup>276</sup> “a niuno altro fine...se non per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attene” (gloss to 1.10). This and all following references to the *Teseida* are from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, ed. Aurelio Roncaglia (Bari, G. Laterza & Figli, 1941). English translation is taken from *The Book of Theseus: Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974). There is some critical debate about whether Chaucer’s manuscript of the *Teseida* included Boccaccio’s explanatory glosses, which I address in the third part of this essay.

<sup>277</sup> “e perciò piú piacevole” (gloss to 1.10).

<sup>278</sup> “sono l’amazone donne, le quali, uccisi tutti li maschi loro, si diedono a l’armi, e fecersi seccare tutte le destre poppe, perciò che le impedivano a tirare l’arco; e però sono chiamate amazone, che vuole tanto dire quanto senza poppa” (gloss to 1.5).

“all their males,” of male familial positions that guarantee patrilineal authority. Additionally, the Amazons’ singular dedication to the mastery of warfare disrupts one of the central *topoi* of epic romance in which men act valiantly, warrior-like, on behalf of passive, constrained women. Indeed, Ipolita later claims that the Amazons are under attack exactly because they “are not satisfied with remaining subject to men and obedient to their whims like other women.”<sup>279</sup> Ritual mastectomy continues the Amazons’ resistance to paradigms of feminine corporeal passivity as they actively excise the fetishized focus of the male gaze. Consequently, their very bodies become a site of resistance to erotic objectification. If, according to Boccaccio, Emilia’s Amazon history is essential to understanding the romance that follows, then that romance is framed in the violence, resistance, and female autonomy that characterizes the Amazon women’s actions and identity.

Boccaccio contextualizes Book I within that feminine autonomy from the start of the book. Once they have killed husbands, fathers, and sons, the women create a new independent society upon the ruins of the destroyed male-dominated order.<sup>280</sup> In addition to the political and social alterity of the new Amazonian collective, Boccaccio’s Ipolita signifies the Amazons’ resistance to traditional gender articulation and performance as she adopts what she views as a masculine identity. She claims that the Amazons perform “manly” deeds with virile courage:

You have declared war on Cupid...in order to display  
your virile courage. You fly from that which pleases  
other women most, while you dare to perform manly,  
rather than womanly, deeds.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> “perché nostro piacer non si contenta/ di quell che l’altre, ciò è suggiacere/ a gli uomini, facendo ill or volere” (1.26.6-8).

<sup>280</sup> 1.8-9. See also 1.10, 17, 1.23, 36 for specific contrasts between Greek and Amazon polity.

<sup>281</sup> “per voler virile animo mostrare,/ contro a Cupido avete presa guerra,/ e quel ch’a l’altre piú piace fuggite,/ uomini fatti, non femine, ardite” (1.24.5-8).

Throughout this rousing speech to the Amazon troops, Ipolita emphasizes their rejection of traditional femininity not only on the corporeal level – at the site of their missing breasts – but also on the level of subjectivity, desire, and agency. She everywhere insists that the Amazons have spurned “womanish behavior” and explicitly rejected such feminine traits as mercy and cowardice, which she orders “put to death in every wise woman.”<sup>282</sup> Instead, the Amazons perform manly deeds from their masculine souls. They desire honor won through active conquest; and the gods approve of their honorable recovery of lost freedom.<sup>283</sup> Interestingly, from the outset of her speech Ipolita opposes this “manly” agency to Cupid – to romantic love and its inherent constraints of women’s identity and ability to speak and act freely. Here Ipolita declares that women’s choice is between romantic love – with its ensuing powerlessness and subjection to men’s “whims” – or active, violent rejection of heteronormative repression. While at the end of Book I, Ipolita and the rest of the Amazons are ultimately constrained into the service of Cupid they resist, here Ipolita represents a type of alterity not political but based upon these women’s capacity for transformation, as they reinscribe masculine valor for their own uses outside the traditional feminine subject positions within romance.<sup>284</sup>

Ipolita’s own actions certainly embody her performance of this manly womanhood. She critiques the objectification of women that implies their ontological inferiority to men.<sup>285</sup> She roams her kingdom like a “wild boar, who...grinds his teeth and roars” as she seeks out her enemy;<sup>286</sup> and, when he attacks her walls from underground, she writes a scathing letter to Teseo challenging his honor as a knight

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<sup>282</sup> “usi pieta altrove, ché qui morta/ la commando io in ogni donna accorta” (1.33.7-8).

<sup>283</sup> 1.26, 32.

<sup>284</sup> See Edwards 24-5

<sup>285</sup> 1.29

<sup>286</sup> “Né altramenti il cinghiar c’ha sentiti/ nel bosco i can fremire e’ cacciatore,/ i denti batte e ruggia” (1.38-9).

while adopting a position of authority from within that chivalric honor code.<sup>287</sup> Her women set ablaze and sink Greek ships and pour molten oil, pitch, and soap on the terrified men.<sup>288</sup> Overall, Book I of the *Teseida* insists upon the possibility of feminine potency, operating outside traditional domains of women's agency and identity, and the consequent threat of violence and disruption of male-centered social and ideological constructions that women can represent. Boccaccio's insistence upon this narrative context for a full understanding of the romance to follow suggests that the story of Emilia the Amazon must resonate with, must even respond to, this narrative beginning.

Some may argue that this description of violence and resistance does not immediately apply to Emilia as she does not actively figure among the Amazon ranks in battle scenes with the Greeks. However, her presence may be suggested when the young Amazon girls ("damigelle"), presumably including Emilia, fortify the walls of the city. Additionally, she is thrice explicitly named "Emilia the Amazon," and her description echoes, sometimes verbatim, the images used to describe Ipolita, that most Amazonian of women. Thus it seems plausible to conclude that Boccaccio's treatment of Emilia links her with the Amazon history he has deliberately included in this story.<sup>289</sup>

### **Repression and Resistance: Chaucer's Emelye**

Within this narrative context, I examine how Chaucer's recapitulation of this romance retains and represses traces of this Amazonian feminine autonomy and threat of violent resistance, traces manifested upon identities, bodies, bodies politic, and especially in the reiterated autonomy of Emelye's subjectivity. Curiously, while some critics discuss the implications of the suppressed *Teseida* Book I, there is no detailed

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<sup>287</sup> 1.99-107

<sup>288</sup> 1.52

<sup>289</sup> 1.96; 1.125.3-6; 3.5-12; 2.9.4; 3.9.4

examination, to my knowledge, tracing the effects of that repression of Emelye's Amazon identity upon her character as she appears in the *Knight's Tale*. Many critics address Chaucer's revisions of *Teseida* Book I, yet their analyses almost exclusively treat the Amazonian episode as not a gendered but a socio-political, ideological, or generic menace. Thus, its marginalization tends to function on these levels.<sup>290</sup> Nor have critics, with the notable exception of Lochrie, examined how Emelye's subjectivity retains the troubling markers of feminine resistance that are so insistently, if incompletely, silenced in the first stanzas of the Knight's narrative. For example, Weisl argues that repressing the Amazon context of the *Knight's Tale* serves to contain the troubling aspects of femininity that lurk at the margins of chivalric romance. While Weisl articulates the Amazon threat at the margins of the *Knight's Tale*, she does not discuss how Emelye, as an Amazon, participates in that feminine menace.<sup>291</sup> Spearing comments upon this paucity of critical treatment as its own kind of repression in modern scholarship.<sup>292</sup> Instead, studies in which the *Teseida* figures alongside the *Knight's Tale*, ironically including Spearing's, usually cite Emelye's "most unAmazonian" or "impoverished" reimagining in Chaucer's tale.<sup>293</sup> According to these readings, Emelye does not display the volition, the awareness of her role as love object, or the consequent coy agency that Emilia possesses in Boccaccio's version. The most famous instance of Emelye's unawareness of her role as erotic object motivating the central conflict of the tale comes in Theseus' ironic observation,

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<sup>290</sup> See, for example, Pratt 614; and, more recently, Anderson 200-1, for the commonly held interpretation of Chaucer's elision of *Teseida* Book I as a decision to omit "elements from his source that did not relate directly to the theme of fraternal strife." For other interpretations of the exclusion of Book I, see Coleman, 89; Muscatine 911-29; Hanning 519-41; Ganim 65-86; Battles 99; Stein 202n; Leicester, *Disenchanted Self*, 236; Edwards, 32; Martin 64; Patterson 168.

<sup>291</sup> See also Hansen, 219; Ganim, 72-77; and Crane 48. Likewise, Strauss articulates the nature of Emelye's resistance to heteronormative constraints in the prayer scene, but, again, the connection of this resistance to Emelye's literary history is absent.

<sup>292</sup> Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 163.

<sup>293</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, 164; Battles, 91.

“She woot namoore of al this hoot fare,/ By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!”<sup>294</sup>

Certainly by the conclusion of Chaucer’s tale Emelye does function in apposition to the unsettling femininity presented by the Amazons: she is silent and domesticated. Yet throughout the tale, and through a reading of the tale against its source in Boccaccio, that Amazon past surfaces insistently, repeatedly, even as it is actively sublimated.

Though the historical and literary proximity of the Amazon’s power is distanced from the reader at the outset of the tale, the tale yet manifests the specter of women’s autonomous potential. That specter and the repressive response to it can be seen in the ways in which Chaucer effaces the women’s agency found in his source. Chaucer reduces the Amazons’ epic battle in *Teseida* Book I to lines figured in the *occupatio* with which many parts of the *Knight’s Tale* are famously narrated:

I wolde have toold yow fully the manere  
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye  
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;  
And of the grete bataille for the nones  
Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;  
And how asseged was Ypolita,  
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;  
And of the feste that was at hir weddyng,  
And of the tempest at hir hoom-comyng;  
But al that thing I moot as now forbere.<sup>295</sup>

In this stanza, as well as a few lines before, Chaucer rhymes “Femenye” – a word he seems to have coined<sup>296</sup> – with “chivalry,” twice emphasizing the binary opposition of

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<sup>294</sup> lines 1809-10

<sup>295</sup> 876-85. All references to the *Knight’s Tale* are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

<sup>296</sup> See *The Middle English Compendium*, s.v. “Femenye,” <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med> (accessed November 26, 2006).

the feminine sphere with the masculine that mirrors that Amazon conflict in his source. Further, the narrator implies that the Amazon struggle for autonomy is not completely contained. Though Hypolita is “asseged,” won, and domesticated, the “tempest” that she initiates at the outset of Boccaccio’s narrative spills out of the missing Book I and continues in Chaucer’s retelling, even as they ride to Athens.<sup>297</sup> That threat continues later when Theseus encounters the Argive widows, who, according to a defensive Theseus, similarly challenge his recently won authority. This other female collective, frenzied in Boccaccio’s narrative but swooning and near-death in Chaucer’s, continues the Amazon threat of challenge to male authority. Perhaps this explains Theseus’ defensive posture before these swooning women: ““What folk been ye, that at myn homcomynge/ Perturben so my feste with crynge?/. . . Have ye so greet envye/ Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?”<sup>298</sup> Yet the possibility of Amazon resistance to male authority is foreclosed as soon as it is invoked. The Argive widows eventually plead, swoon, and beg while the description of Hypolita’s tempestuousness is simply cut off. Ultimately, Chaucer’s use of *occupatio* and extreme abbreviation of his source places this site of female power and resistance to male authority under erasure from the beginning of the tale. Indeed, women are often silenced with *occupatio* in the *Knight’s Tale*,<sup>299</sup> giving the impression that the Knight must use explicit rhetorical maneuvers to contain their voices.<sup>300</sup>

This passage as a site of feminine power under erasure is especially interesting when read against the Knight’s claims in the lines immediately following that he

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<sup>297</sup> Lochrie makes a similar point in “Amazons at the Gates,” page 127.

<sup>298</sup> lines 905-8. See Leicester, *Disenchanted Self*, 228-9 for a further discussion of Theseus’ response to the Argive widows.

<sup>299</sup> For example, upon Arcite’s death, the Knight relates that Emelye shrieked and swooned, deferring her actual words with “What helpith it to tarien forth the day/ To tellen how she weep both eve and morwe?/ For in swich cas women have swich sorwe./ Whan that hir housbondes ben from hem ago./ That for the moore part they sorwen so./ Or eles fallen in swich maladye./ That at the laste certainly they dye” (2820-6). See also 2943-4.

<sup>300</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, 169. See also Schwartz 222, who argues that the Knight is “refusing either to tell the story [of Theseus’ conquest] or to leave it alone.”

cannot tell these events because “I have...a large feeld to ere,/ And wayke been the oxen in my plough.”<sup>301</sup> The connection of plowing with both writing and masculine sexual activity in other medieval texts has been noted,<sup>302</sup> and the Miller perhaps amplifies the connection when Absolon wields the phallic coulter against Nicholas in the next tale.<sup>303</sup> Contrasting with the “faire, hardy” women of the previous lines, this “wayke” male position suggests a narrative context particularly troubled with male impotence, an impotence that initiates the repression of women.

As in the *Teseida*, it is this context of troubled male authority that frames the romance to follow, in which female autonomy, actual or potential, is met with rhetorical and narrative mechanisms of containment. Theseus’ precarious authority recalls the image of Conquest in Mars’ temple. There, Conquest’s seat of honor is constantly menaced by the sword hanging precariously over his head by a “soutil twynes threed.” Theseus’ conquest of Femenye, in the service of Mars, seems equally threatened.<sup>304</sup> Like Teseo, Chaucer’s Theseus conquers and domesticates the threatening women he encounters. One may wonder, in this fraught space, how Emelye in particular fares. Does she actively engage in this gendered power struggle, or is she wholly removed in the narrative sublimation and complete objectification most often cited by modern scholarship? Certainly romance conventions demand that Emelye’s character be vacated of much of her expressed interiority, as Weisl argues, in order to facilitate the love plot and the male authority dependent upon it.<sup>305</sup> If women step out of their prescribed roles, both male-dominated regimes of order and the romance genre are threatened: the romance cannot end as a romance and slips into

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<sup>301</sup> 886-7

<sup>302</sup> See Dinshaw, 14-5. Dinshaw cites Alain de Lille’s *De planctu naturae*, the *Roman de la Rose*, 19513-762, as well as the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* for the sexualized and literary plough. See also Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* 7.4221 for a proverbial expression linking the plough with heterosexual union within marriage.

<sup>303</sup> *Miller’s Tale* 3730-3815

<sup>304</sup> lines 2028-30; 975

<sup>305</sup> Weisl 3

another genre, since a woman “has to be there to make the story go.”<sup>306</sup> Donaldson best expresses Emelye’s generic constraint, in positive terms, when he argues that Chaucer has intentionally written Emelye to have no character in order to use her as a symbol, because “symbols such as Emelye do not act, they merely are...Emelye is one of the ideas that make this world tolerable, and if she were given a personality, she would lose her symbolic significance as the goal toward which the better side of chivalry aspires.”<sup>307</sup>

This model of constraint describes Emelye’s narrative position well: as the curtain goes down on the tale, she has been effectively marginalized and objectified, literally domesticated. However, I maintain that, despite the repressive mechanisms of romance, Emelye does retain some markers of her Amazon past, markers that are best revealed in reverberation with women’s speech and action in the *Teseida*. These traces, present in the single scene in which she articulates her interiority, manifest her Amazon subjectivity while also fueling the tale’s most extreme reinscription of that interiority and her body into paradigms of male authority and control.

Within the context of a tale troubled by women’s potency and the specter of Amazonian uprising, Emelye’s prayer to Diana in the temple dedicated to that goddess seems a natural outgrowth of her Amazon past and her response to the romance conventions that repress her subjectivity and limit her agency. Interestingly, while the houses of Mars and Venus are described at some length in the *Teseida*, Boccaccio only describes Diana’s temple as clean and decorated with beautiful wall hangings;<sup>308</sup> the rest of the temple is Chaucer’s creation. In fact, to fill in this narrative creation,

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<sup>306</sup> Weisl 13

<sup>307</sup> Donaldson 48, 49. Ganim argues that the tale’s female agency “articulates itself only by its absence, by symbolic substitution, or in something close to masquerade” (77). See also Wallace 107. Many critics have commented upon Emelye’s function as impersonal embodiment of Nature. See, for example, Spearing, *Knight’s Tale*, 40; and Leicester, *Disenchanted Self*, 232. For Emelye as a version of love object reminiscent of the *Romance of the Rose*, see Martin, 44.

<sup>308</sup> 7.72

Chaucer drew upon more sources, and more diverse sources, than in any other part of the tale.<sup>309</sup> Yet Diana's temple provides the only space in which Emelye can speak for herself.<sup>310</sup> Before the tournament that will decide which of her admirers will win her, Emelye prays to Diana:

O chaste goddesse of the wodes grene...  
Goddesse of maydens, that myn herte hast knowe  
Ful many a yeer, and woost what I desire,  
...to ben a mayden al my lyf,  
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.  
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,  
A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,  
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,  
And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe.  
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man...  
Bihoold, goddesse of clene chastitee,  
The bitter teeris that on my chekes falle.  
Syn thou are mayde and kepere of us alle,  
My maydenhede thou kepe and wel conserve,  
And whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve.<sup>311</sup>

While these few sentences are all Emelye is allowed to utter in this tale, they reveal much about her desires. She specifically underscores her past, her history as a devotee of Diana, and reiterates her desire to bring that past into the present and beyond. What she has desired “ful many a yeer” – the autonomous life outside male authority – she currently practices and will continue to enact as long as her body is under her authority

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<sup>309</sup> See Coleman, 126-31.

<sup>310</sup> Edwards, 32.

<sup>311</sup> lines 2297, 2300-1, 2305-11, 2326-30

to signify. Further, she emphasizes her present participation in a feminine community, recalling the communities of Amazons and other women which have threatened Athenian stability and authority from the margins of the tale. Her repetition of “compaignye,” referring alternately to purely female and male groups, establishes another binary opposition, this time of social collectives. Thus, her desire to be outside and Other in this case carries a communal valence, recalling the communal alterity of the Amazons’ society opposed violently to the Greeks.

Emelye also represents heterosexuality, marriage, and childbirth as unwanted social constraints, especially as she opposes them – even in the end rhyme – with walking freely in the “wodes wilde.” Further, the triple negative in line 2306, as well as the continued negatives in lines 2310 and 2311, emphasize as adamantly as possible her desire to remain outside romantic and domestic structures of women’s repression: those negatives – “ne nevere” and twice “nought” – begin any statement referring to traditional social activities for women. While the emphatic nature of her prayer is often overlooked, Emelye is clearly, insistently unwavering in her rejection of the restrictions – on her body, agency, desires, and, ultimately, her identity – resulting from the roles of wife and mother the knights demand of her.<sup>312</sup>

This interpretation of Emelye’s prayer benefits from a comparison with Emilia’s prayer in the *Teseida*. While Emilia also calls upon her history of service to Diana, including her Amazon past, her prayer ends paradoxically with a volition that seems divided between Diana’s obligations and Juno’s. She prays, if she must marry, that Diana will select among her suitors for her, not because she desires neither man, but because she desires them both: “for I myself do not know which one to choose, so winsome does each one seem to me.”<sup>313</sup> This collapse of resistance into desire

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<sup>312</sup> Here I follow Strauss, 252.

<sup>313</sup> “ché io nol so in me stessa nomare,/ tanto ciascun piacevole mi pare” (7.85.7-8).

undercuts Emilia's Amazon identity, turning resistance to a coy masking of latent romantic desire. Conversely, Emelye's prayer includes no such latent domestic or heterosexual desire. While she also ultimately submits to her destiny, likewise praying that Diana "sende me hym that moost desireth me," she surrounds that request with reiterated assertions of desires for independence.<sup>314</sup> She prays "fro me turne away hir hertes so/ That...al hir busy torment.../[be] turned in another place."<sup>315</sup> She desires extraction, even effacement from, the web of erotic desires enacted by the objectifying male gaze.<sup>316</sup> Her prayer ends, not with Emilia's unveiled heterosexual desire, but with a reassertion of her intended maidenhood.<sup>317</sup> Read against Emilia's prayer, Emelye's loses the veneer of polite or modest chastity often associated with it and gains an insistence, a determined preservation of her resistance and position outside traditional paradigms of feminine agency and volition, what Lochrie calls, "the aggressive, dangerous chastity that is a part of her martial masculinity."<sup>318</sup>

Ultimately, Emelye's few sentences in Diana's temple express most fully her own desires: to continue her Amazon identity, so clearly figured in her literary past, in opposition to the paradigms of male control exercised in regimes of marriage, childbirth, and heterosexual desire. Emelye's prayer, thus, retains traces of the "regne of Femenye" as it iterates an interiority still adamantly resistant to these traditional mechanisms of male authority.<sup>319</sup> In addition to her prayer, I also cannot resist gesturing towards Emelye's body as another site of self-iteration; she does still, presumably, bear the mark of her missing right breast, that rather permanent sign of Amazonian identity. What that means for her identity seems to be shrouded in the same absence as the *occupatio* that conjures and denies Amazonian self-expression

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<sup>314</sup> line 2325

<sup>315</sup> lines 2318, 2320-21

<sup>316</sup> See Leicester for a discussion of Emelye's effacement in this scene (*Disenchanted Self*, 312).

<sup>317</sup> lines 2328-30

<sup>318</sup> Lochrie 128

<sup>319</sup> Here I agree with Hansen, 209.

elsewhere in the tale. Ultimately, Emelye becomes the field upon which the specter of female uprising, haunting the margins of the *Knight's Tale* from its beginning, must be disempowered and reconstituted.

### **Reinscribing Emelye's Unruly Body**

Thus far we have seen how the *Knight's Tale* evinces a suspicion of the recurring threat of female potency. And we have examined some narrative and rhetorical devices for repressing the unruly feminine, with her troubling and persistent literary past.<sup>320</sup> It is within and against this context that I propose to read two controversial, or else rarely treated, passages in the *Knight's Tale*, both of which manifest the scopophilic mechanisms by which Emelye's interiority is vacated and silenced.

The temple of Diana is the space wherein Emelye most explicitly expresses her desires outside the control of chivalric or romance conventions. The temple may also represent the only private, secret space allowed in a tale that famously celebrates public spectacle. Spearing's argument that secrecy works "to create a real or imagined refuge against the determining claims of the public sphere" might further the suggestion that the temple of Diana is an especially threatening space within this public and male-centered milieu – it is both feminine and private – in a tale menaced from the outset.<sup>321</sup> It is, then, not surprising to find in that space the most forceful attempt at rearticulating Emelye's body and her resistant interiority as an object for male desire. That forceful reconstitution is just what we find in the temple scenes, where the Knight's voyeuristic gaze rests upon the body of Emelye. The site of contest, and conquest, is ultimately her distinctly feminine, resistant, unveiled body and the unveiled interior life it signals.

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<sup>320</sup> See Spearing, *Voyeur*, 163 for a discussion of the unconscious of the *Knight's Tale*.

<sup>321</sup> *Voyeur*, 22.

When Emelye begins her rituals within the temple, this space of feminine activity and articulation, the Knight reveals:

This Emelye, with herte debonaire,  
Hir body wessh with water of a welle.  
But hou she dide hir ryte I dar nat telle,  
But it be any thing in general;  
And yet it were a game to heeren al.  
To hym that meneth wel it were no charge;  
But it is good a man been at his large.<sup>322</sup>

This passage is not found in Boccaccio, beyond a detail that Emilia washes herself and puts on clean clothes.<sup>323</sup> As in the first stanzas of the tale, Chaucer again employs *occupatio*, and with a similar effect: readers are invited to imagine Emelye's naked body in its private, feminine ritual. The titillation derived from the action is suggested by the narrator's felt obligation to excuse his voyeurism, not found in Boccaccio, and "betrays the storyteller's embarrassment at how exciting he finds the thought of these female rites."<sup>324</sup> Others have connected his stated reluctance to describe Emelye with the painting in Diana's temple in which Actaeon is punished for seeing Diana naked; the narrator may wish to avoid Actaeon's fate.<sup>325</sup> In either case, the Knight's discourse situates him particularly as a male viewer talking to other sympathetic men. That is, the sight of Emelye produces homosocial discourse, literally across the spectral, objectified feminine body.

Yet this moment does more than objectify Emelye. This male leering is an

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<sup>322</sup> lines 2282-88

<sup>323</sup> 7.72. This passage's difficult Middle English may account for the thinness of its treatment in much modern scholarship. Spearing translates the passage: "This Emily, with modest heart, washed her body with water from a well. But how she performed her rite I dare not tell, unless it should be in somewhat general terms; and yet it would be fun to hear everything. It would be no burden to any man who means well; but it is a good thing for a man to be free to imagine it" (*Voyeur*, 22).

<sup>324</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, 22

<sup>325</sup> See Martin 51. See also Spearing, *Voyeur*, 167; Leicester, *Disenchanted Self*, 309-10

active assertion of male power over women; women's bodies can, and ought, to serve as the field legitimating and privileging masculinity and heterosexuality. In addition to a gendered objectification, the power to look often, though not always, reproduces social and political authority, when "the scope of the prince's gaze marks his public dominion" and potency.<sup>326</sup> The *Knight's Tale* is replete with instances of the male gaze marking their public authority, as well as the fetishizing male gaze of the garden scene treated at length by critics.<sup>327</sup> Others have asserted the most insistent reproductions of the fetishizing "phallic gaze" happen in particularly private spaces.<sup>328</sup> This model of the private as the space for spectral erotic objectification may illuminate the force of the reinscription of Emelye's body here: in private, she operates as the spectral object of erotic pleasure among men. The near proverbial tone of the final line – "But it is good a man been at his large" – suggests that this dictum, and the passive female body it requires, is a commonplace in this society. Ultimately, the Knight's leering gaze upon her body – present and absent in *occupatio* – and her washing ritual presents the kind of violation that Emelye fears in her prayer.<sup>329</sup> It is in this look that names then refuses to describe her body, and in its insistence upon the pleasure that, according to the Knight, all men have a right to take in this voyeurism, that Emelye's body is revealed, sexualized, and reappropriated against her will as an erotic object by men among men. Perhaps it is this moment of corporal fetishizing to which the Miller responds in his own subsequent tale famous for its revelation of orifices as a site of fascination and pleasure, both erotic and comic.<sup>330</sup>

A second voyeuristic moment goes further in its rearticulation of Emelye's body as romance object. Significantly, after her washing ritual, and in response to her

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<sup>326</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, 22

<sup>327</sup> lines 896, 1066, 2983-4. See, among others, Spearing, *Voyeur*, 164-5; and Hansen.

<sup>328</sup> See Stanbury 266; and Camille 309.

<sup>329</sup> Strauss, 253.

<sup>330</sup> Gatens further suggests that this kind of "corporeal specificity" has been used historically to exclude women and others from the body politic (see page 83 especially).

fiercely autonomous prayer, the Knight describes the gods' reply:

But sodeynly she saugh a sighte queynte,  
For right anon oon of the fyres queynte  
And quyked again, and after that anon  
That oother fyr was queynt and al agon;  
And as it queynte it made a whistelynge,  
As doon this wete brondes ende out ran anon  
As it were bloody dropes many oon;  
For which so soore agast was Emelye  
That she was wel ny mad and gan to crye<sup>331</sup>

This scene represents a continuation of the voyeuristic uncovering and rearticulation of Emelye's body initiated as the Knight observed her washing ritual earlier. Here, the repetition of the word "queynte" sexualizes the scene and seems to further the voyeuristic "game" among men – among the Knight and the male audience he addresses– begun in the previous scene. While he cannot quite describe Emelye's secret washing rite, he does describe, in graphic detail, the inescapable fate of Emelye's body. Despite – indeed because of – her unruly desires articulated in her prayer, her body is destined to be reclaimed for the regime of erotic pleasure upon which the chivalric code depends. According to Strauss, the description of the sexualized fires as phallic logs and virginal vaginas – wet, squeaking, and bloody – accomplishes two things: it shows the Knight's inappropriate obsession with Emelye's body, and it turns her adamant rejection of heterosexuality into a powerless fear of male potency and sexual force.<sup>332</sup> Taken together, these two increasingly forceful revelations of Emelye's body in Diana's temple transform her breastless, resistant

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<sup>331</sup> lines 2333-42. See O'Brian, 157-67, for the history of the debate over the valence of "queynte" in Chaucer. While the meaning of the term remains a contested issue, he concludes with others that the proliferating queyntes do initiate and circulate in a scene charged with sexualized body images.

<sup>332</sup> Strauss 254

body with its autonomous subjectivity into the objective terrain across which men communicate, take erotic pleasure, and found and perpetuate male-dominated society. It is no wonder that we hear no more from Emelye in the tale: at this point, her one statement of interiority now countered with increasingly explicit mechanisms of containment, she is effectively silenced as the passive body to be negotiated among Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite.

Some critics have resisted any overtly sexualized reading of the temple fires, or of Emelye in any scene, arguing that such readings are out of place in an innocently pious scene in a genteel chivalric romance. However, this overt, even obscene, eroticism does seem to have a place in Emelye's literary history. That is, some manuscripts of the *Teseida* include a series of erotic glosses describing what nearly every male character in that other chivalric romance narrative wants to do to Emilia's body. Coleman presents these glosses, as well as others, in his discussion of which *Teseida* manuscript, or which manuscript family, Chaucer must have known in his composition of the *Knight's Tale*.<sup>333</sup> Though these obscene glosses appear in only nine of forty-seven manuscripts, in the *alpha* family of manuscripts, other critics insist, upon linguistic evidence, that Chaucer must have known Boccaccio's glosses. Coleman says the determining factor arguing against Chaucer's knowledge of the glosses is that he doesn't make use of them in the *Knight's Tale*. I maintain that the voyeuristic fetishizing of Emelye's body in Diana's temple replicates and continues precisely the same kind of objectification, with its violent overtones, present in this glossed treatment of Emilia.

On his deathbed, Arcite wishes he could marry Emilia "so that he might have felt that sweetness which is so pleasing to the friars."<sup>334</sup> Later he again laments that

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<sup>333</sup> Coleman 110-14

<sup>334</sup> "acciò che avessi sentito di quella dolcitudine che piace così ai frati" (gloss to 10.40.5). These five erotic glosses and their English translations are taken from Coleman, 113.

Emilia was not able to grant him entry to her “places...where the honey is scooped out.”<sup>335</sup> After Arcita’s death, Teseo encourages Emilia to give up the service of Diana so that someone might “work her garden.”<sup>336</sup> On the night of their wedding, Palemone and Emilia have intercourse seven times, and the gloss elaborates: “It means that seven times he touched the lily where it does most good for woman, and one can believe that that night he scooped out a great deal of sugar and honey from it.”<sup>337</sup> Finally, the next morning, the Greek kings joke with Palemone, asking, “So how was it to break that little cloth?” “Did she cry out as you kept skinning her?” “Did you unload inside?” “Will you come up with enough for a second time?” “Who got the most out of it?” “Will you let me have a piece of that sweet-cake?” “Will you save the best part [lit.: “skin”] for me?”<sup>338</sup> Interestingly, after this “skinning,” Boccaccio writes that Palemone “arose when morning came, more comely and fresh than a thorn rose.”<sup>339</sup> For her part, Emilia neither gets up from this encounter, nor does she appear again in the remainder of the narrative.

Taken together, these bawdy comments reveal the same violent, sexual conquest of an objectified female body replicated in Chaucer’s temple scenes. Boccaccio’s glosses add imagery and narrative force to the Knight’s claim that “it is good a man been at his large.” Both texts seem to insist upon the sexualized female body, vacated of its interiority, as the necessary site for homosocial discourse and connection. No longer resistant or, for that matter, audible or even present after her narrative and sexual “skinning,” her body is now available for men’s use. Far from distancing himself from his source in the temple scene, the Knight explicitly invites

<sup>335</sup> “Loughi...dónde si cava il mele” (gloss to 10.40.7).

<sup>336</sup> “lavorare il suo giardino” (gloss to 12.43.7).

<sup>337</sup> “Dice che sette volte toccò il giglio dove più giova alla femina e credesi che quella notte ne cavassi gran quantità di zucchero e di mele” (gloss to 12.77.4).

<sup>338</sup> “Sì com’ era rompesi quell pannicello?” “Pianse ella come camminasti a la tua scorticata?” “Scharicasti tu dentro?” “Trovera’ ve ne tu per un’ altra volta?” “A chui ne giovò più?” “Farai ch’ io abbi un pezuolo di quel migliaccio?” “Serbera’ mi il chuoio?” (gloss to 12.79.5-8).

<sup>339</sup> “el si levò, venuta la mattina, / piú bello e fresco che rosa di spina” (12.77.7-8).

readers to revisit the literary history of this scene for the full, voyeuristic effect.<sup>340</sup> While Coleman argues that these glosses undercut Boccaccio's overall genteel tone, Chaucer, echoing them in his own romance narrative, suggests that this obscene leering and erotic fetishization may underlie the expression of chivalric courtly love in both versions.<sup>341</sup> Whatever Chaucer's argument about the mechanisms of chivalry, my point here is that this repressive narrative response to Emelye's defiant, unruly interiority is best viewed against its literary history in Boccaccio's version – in the interstices between Boccaccio and Chaucer – and, in part, as a product of that comparison.

While readers, including many of the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrims themselves,<sup>342</sup> interpret the *Knight's Tale* as a narrative of love and chivalry in which men engage its central ideologies, the *Knight's Tale* simultaneously tells the story of one woman's desire to live outside the regimes of male control and objectification produced and legitimated by that romance. In a tale haunted at its historical margins by the specter of female uprising, Emelye's interiority, when she articulates it, proves genuinely threatening to male authority recently won and precariously maintained. Emelye evinces an inner life that does actively participate in the consciousness, identity, and desires of her Amazon past; and, although Chaucer titillates readers with her history – revealed and veiled – as he titillates them with her body, left to herself Emelye promises to continue her resistant trajectory into the future. The narrative response to this unruly trajectory operates first through a voyeuristic objectification, then a more explicit and potentially violent reappropriation of Emelye's body. In the process, Emelye's subjectivity is effectively emptied of its power to speak as itself for itself – vacated of its articulated interiority – so that her silent and docile body may be

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<sup>340</sup> lines 2292-4

<sup>341</sup> Coleman 113.

<sup>342</sup> See, for example lines 3109-13 in the prologue to the *Miller's Tale*.

transacted among Theseus, Arcite, and Palamon at the end of the tale.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of reading the *Knight's Tale* against its sources, especially when Chaucer so consistently invites his readers to do just that. The potency with which Emelye articulates her inner life, carrying the valence of recent Amazonian defiance and autonomy, manifests itself – and is ultimately produced – in reading Emelye against her Amazon history as presented in the *Teseida*. Wallace uses a similar methodology in his influential treatment of Griselde.<sup>343</sup> His reading of Griselde against her literary history discusses her various political significations as she moves – via translation – across historical contexts from Boccaccio to Petrarch to Chaucer. Likewise, I am arguing for a comparison, a reading between or across, Emelye's manifestations in Boccaccio and Chaucer's narratives, a reading between that reveals a transmission process in which Emelye's literary past complicates her character more than genre constraints allow. This comparison also suggests that characters such as Emelye have a literary subjectivity – an identity and history – created in the interstices of that history that overflow the bounds of any single representation or intention. In this way, the limits of Emelye's interiority are found in the space between the narratives of Chaucer and Boccaccio. This theory of literary subjectivity dependent upon or produced by relations between texts suggests both a new understanding of Emelye in the *Knight's Tale* and a new interpretive strategy to bring to bear upon texts and characters that operate in the spaces of historical representation. If Emelye is disruptive in the way that history itself is disruptive – changing the meaning of textual contents as they pass into new contexts – then readers benefit from an engagement of those contexts to understand the scope of the identities created in that historical domain. For it is in these spaces that characters like Emelye, otherwise silenced, voice their clearest expression of subjectivity.

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<sup>343</sup> In “‘Whan She Translated Was’: A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy.”

## **Dispersal, Love**

What I tried to address in this previous essay, taken from a past iteration of my engagement with this narrative self, are the mechanisms by which Emelye is taken apart and the social and cultural motivations for that rupture. Throughout the analysis, I figure Emelye's rupture as lack, as the empty space of her victimization, and her response as resistance or disruption. And on some level I must also implicitly participate in this victimization as I adopt the posture of critical Amazon avenger, my laptop not requiring the mastectomy necessitated by the bow and the shield. I do not disavow this former treatment, or the former self that wrote it. Derrida, following Levinas, locates our ethical engagement with the world with a turning towards the Other, an avowal of the Other, even an Other self from a time past. I avow the self that told the story of rupture as disciplinary containment, just as I avow the literary self that was contained.

In his insightful article on encountering "Geoff Chaucer" in Brian Helgeland's film *A Knight's Tale*, Edmonson describes the transtemporal engagements provoked by Chaucer's naked body. He argues that Geoff Chaucer's displacement in the narrative – he is naked, dirty, walking alone along a road, and unknown to those who encounter him – responds to Geoffrey Chaucer's dispersal across times, maintaining that "Chaucer only achieves self-identity once his work begins to appear somewhere other than where he would normally be located, only when his second nature is found wandering far from its source."<sup>344</sup> Edmonson writes that he resists the urge to "dress" this naked Chaucer, to cover over the temporal and subjective ruptures opened across the naked flesh (in film, in literary history) of the dispersed Chaucer in order to turn towards what he calls an emancipation "from a dead time," to free this Chaucer to

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<sup>344</sup> Edmonson 146

exist in multiple states, in multiple times.<sup>345</sup> My encounter with Emelye in Chaucer's version of the *Knight's Tale* strikes a similar chord, provokes a similar response. While she is not naked, she is certainly revealed, laid bare in Diana's temple, and then, of course, taken apart. In the essay above my desire was to name the violent disrobing, perhaps even to dress Emelye in the interpretive coverings – of hetero-resistance, for example, or mournful longing – that must always point to the victimization against which she struggles. If I were to respond to Emelye's rupture in another mode beyond critical appropriation or masochism, a mode that gestures to Edmonson's freeing of naked Chaucer, I might ask a different kind of question of myself as reader. I might ask, what kinds of interpretations are permitted by Emelye's nakedness, by her rupture? What modes of identity come into being across that openness?

At the very least, Emelye's ruptured, unclothed self becomes a terrain that overflows the interpretive boundaries advanced to contain it. She herself seems caught in a double bind of self expression. Her articulation of desire is always turned to something else – some other desire, some unnamable state of self, a self-rupture that leaves her unable to articulate herself. There are hints of this self rupture in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, in which Emilia's desire for Amazonian autonomy seems to capitulate to a latent desire for the man who loves her best. Chaucer's Emelye gestures to this capitulation, but surrounds it with an overpowering voice of militant refusal. It is as if, as Lochrie has written, what is at stake in Chaucer's version is the conscription of an inner Amazonian subjectivity to an outer Athenian convention.<sup>346</sup> And both versions place Emilia/Emelye at the threshold of this Amazonian/Athenian divide. Yet, unlike Lochrie, I would rather leave room for Emelye's desire to exist in

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<sup>345</sup> Edmonson 147

<sup>346</sup> Lochrie 128

the space of the undecidable. Not quite Lochrie's vision of "female masculinity," at least not always, and not quite domesticated courtly heroine, Emelye exists on the threshold between the two, reverberating between, with a self-as-between.

This self-rupture as a kind of identitarian undecidability, fragmentation as the horizon of being, is no where more evident than across the Emilia conjured in Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*. If my argument above is that Emelye's literary subjectivity is conjured in the space between her narrative remembering, that subjectivity extends across all conjurations and is only productively complicated in those spaces. Styled as a member of the Amazons recently "shrunk...into/ The bound thou wast o'erflowing" by a victorious Theseus,<sup>347</sup> Shakespeare's Emilia ultimately confounds those bounds of gender and of desire in the play. She articulates the most clear expression of same-sex desire, ending an erotic recounting of her longing for a female "playfellow" with a breathless declaration that "the true love 'tween maid and maid may be/ More than in sex dividual."<sup>348</sup> With tantalizingly sensual longing, Emilia describes her intimate love for this woman: "The flower that I would pluck/ And put between my breasts – O then but beginning/ To swell about the blossom – she would long/ Till she had another, and commit it/ To the like innocent cradle, where, phoenix-like,/ They died in perfume."<sup>349</sup> In one extraordinary scene, Emilia engages in lengthy eroticized banter with her waiting woman, the dialogue of which is interspersed with the shared desire of Palamon and Arcite for Emilia, whom they see, but cannot hear, from the window of their shared prison.<sup>350</sup> This scene of ironic mirroring - Emilia's erotic longing for the lady, Palamon and Arcite's for Emilia – concludes with Emilia and the woman agreeing to go in and "lie down" together as

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<sup>347</sup> 1.1.83-4

<sup>348</sup> 1.3.82-3.

<sup>349</sup> 1.3.66-71

<sup>350</sup> 2.2.115-153.

lovers.<sup>351</sup> That this mirrored discourse occurs in a longer conversation in which an imprisoned Palamon and Arcite declare their love for each other, their intimacy making them “one another’s wife” so that they are “wanton/ with...captivity,” only complicates the ways in which same-sex desire intermingles with heterosexual desire, even to the point that Palamon and Arcite’s desire for Emilia becomes merely a function of their desire for each other. Emilia’s desire for the woman is literally an undercurrent unaffected by heterosexual machinations above; yet the interspersed dialogue makes it difficult to decide, ultimately, the limits of same-sex and hetero-sex desire. Shakespeare here unfolds the Amazonian desire for female company, what Chaucer’s Emelye calls her desire for “venerye,” and turns it towards explicit same-sex eroticization while at the same time placing Emilia squarely at the threshold of a kind of hetero- and homo-commingling.

Further opening this space of the undecidable, once Emilia learns of their love, their conflict, she is torn, unable to articulate her own desire faced with an ethical abhorrence that her “chastity/ Be made the altar where the lives of lovers.../ must be the sacrifice/ To my unhappy beauty”;<sup>352</sup> a responsibility that she fears will make her “nothing but the scorn of women.”<sup>353</sup> It is not quite clear whether she fears alienating herself from one of her male suitors, or from the company of women she has desired to this point. She vacillates, not just between which of the men to choose, but how to choose to love them at all, to the point that it is impossible to discern where her final desire lays. When Theseus demands that she choose, she cryptically responds, “I cannot, sir. They are both too excellent.”<sup>354</sup> Finally, she expresses a kind of self-rupture, or the utter unknowability or undecidability of her self, in the loss of all reason and explicitly stable desire, “O, who can find the bent of a woman’s fancy?/ I

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<sup>351</sup> 2.2

<sup>352</sup> 4.2.60-1; 63-4

<sup>353</sup> 3.6.250

<sup>354</sup> 3.6.285

am a fool, my reason is lost in me,/ I have no choice, and I have lied so lewdly/ That women ought to beat me.”<sup>355</sup> Emilia seems ultimately estranged from herself, unable to pin down her desires, when she finally states, “I am sotted,/ Utterly lost”; and another female character, an underclass mirror of Emilia, declares in the next scene that she is “cracked to pieces with love.”<sup>356</sup> Love for whom, ultimately, is left unexposed, unknowable in the open and space of Emilia’s desire. Like her body in Boccaccio’s and in Chaucer’s remembering of her, Emilia’s being itself approaches disarticulation in Shakespeare’s version.

As I argued in my past essay, Emelye/Emilia overflows the boundaries of any narrative treatment, in a transhistorical, transcultural expansiveness of being that occurs precisely across her corporeal ruptures, the suturing and reopening of which constitute her narrative reimaginings. Taken apart across her literary past, Emelye/Emilia exceeds her own historical moment, reappearing, having been reconjured both in the *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and in every subsequent analysis, including this one. Itself undone in Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s versions, and again in Shakespeare’s, Emelye’s body reaches forward to be the undoing of those who read her. Her body is unmoored from the signifying systems that would attempt to identify it – as courtly ideal, as terrain of heterosexual desire, as the terrain of the prehistory of same-sex desire – and roams across many desires, touching even my own, confounding my own reading practice, calling into question my own desire, for critical authority, for historical distance. Encountering Emelye’s literary selves and bodies, and her captivation within signifying systems, brings to light my own subjection to the histories and ideologies that inform how I conjure her, how I repress or express, abject or introject, her story into my own. Edmonson writes that “We find ourselves aligned

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<sup>355</sup> 4.2.33-36

<sup>356</sup> 4.2.45-6; 4.3.21

with the medieval other at the point where we catch, in the other's creaturely state, an anamorphic glimpse of our own self-estrangement, our own dislocation" caught in the pressures of what he calls a biopolitical subjection.<sup>357</sup> To me, that means that I am undone as I read her, in the sense that I cannot make her out (just as she, in Shakespeare's vision, cannot quite know herself); she evades my grasp, yet grasps me in return, across my own historical iterations. This connection in estrangement is my connection with the medieval other, my posture towards encountering the medieval other across times.

What does this double-grasp, double-bind teach us about the eccentric body? Certainly, embodied identity is eccentric in its transhistorical movements. Emelye's example here illustrates that the undoing of a body, even repeatedly, across historical iterations, disperses its identifications across histories, across terrains of desire, across selves to the point that it is both finally undecidable, like the flesh ball in the *King of Tars*. And like that ball of pure flesh, this repeated corporeal opening means that Emelye is present everywhere, infinitely available for meaning. In this way, Emelye's ruptured embodied self resonates with what MacKendrick observes about the body of the saint undone in its multiple iterations as relic.<sup>358</sup> This body's unified essence in partibility illustrates how wholeness and fragmentation need not be opposites in a medieval paradigm, how partibility might even multiply sites of presence across times and spaces, "manifesting a fullness of life that does not demand wholeness but multiplies its sites in fragmentation."<sup>359</sup> Likewise, the repetition of Emelye reproduces the undecidable split in her own desires, recollects that split to be broken again and again (and to a greater degree in Shakespeare's version, and in mine?). This idea of recollection and memory is relevant to Emelye as she is recollected in Boccaccio,

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<sup>357</sup> Edmonson 157

<sup>358</sup> See especially her brief essay, "The Multipliable Body," as well as *Fragmentation and Memory* 107-115.

<sup>359</sup> *Fragmentation and Memory*, 115

Chaucer, Shakespeare, and in me. And each time is a resurrection of both a brokenness and also a kind of eternity that is outside of time, that makes time fold upon itself as Boccaccio remakes Shakespeare, and Chaucer responds to me, and I am undone in the spaces of Emelye's recollection. Finally, Emelye's repeatedly undone embodied self invites interaction with other characters, with other readers, with an intimacy not possible without that dispersal.

Instead of replaying this dispersal as lack, or exclusively as lack, I would like to extend a reading practice that reads these eccentric, excessive bodies in the context of affirmation. I would like to affirm Emelye's recollection, which reaffirms her own futurity, in "the promise of another recurrence."<sup>360</sup> Instead of avenging, perhaps re-victimizing, and certainly distancing, I can draw close, attend, resonate, and love. Love, according to Nancy, always entails both completion and disintegration; love is "at once the promise of completion...but a promise always disappearing – and the threat of decomposition, always imminent."<sup>361</sup> Emelye embodies this betweenness enfolded in love; she is both ever-present in her recollections and ever absent in her decomposition. In a sense, the experience of her literary history, her transhistorical existence as presence in recollection and fragmentation anew is the picture of identity I've been arguing for all beings: identity as multiple, movable precisely in its circulations across the ruptured body. As MacKendrick writes,

identity is made in wounds and scars, made in the spaces of absence and the imperfect seams of their mending...the body remembers, and among the moments it remembers most vividly are those of its own breaking. We carry in our flesh the memories of our loves and our lovers, and like our scars these memories play a part in our self-

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<sup>360</sup> *ibid* 31

<sup>361</sup> Nancy, "Shattered Love," in *The Inoperative Community*, 93

construction. Love gives us ourselves, perhaps, but not as wholes, not unbroken; if some part of us was missing, this makes a strange completion. Love remains, rather, as a promise of completion and fragmentation both.<sup>362</sup>

Emelye's partibility, like the Jewish bodies in the *Siege of Jerusalem*, (and like Christ's in the Eucharist) is "more or other than loss."<sup>363</sup> Like the Eucharistic body, Emelye is present each time we recollect her in her fragmentation, her absence, as well as her presence, each time we take her presence into ourselves and allow ourselves to be undone, as she is undone. Emelye's dispersal does not have to lead to endless cycles of death - her own and ours as we recount it "lovingly." Rather, we love Emelye when we remember her, for love is, as Nancy writes, "a promise, kept not by fulfillment but by remaking in the manner of memory...It is a promise as well to share joy without denying mourning, and thus a promise to cut through time, a promise of the eternal."<sup>364</sup> It is in this perpetual re-remembering, sharing, turning toward and drawing into, that we face the eccentric, excessive bodies of the past, not in order to police their borders, to make them whole, to constitute ourselves against their contours, or to suture together the corporeal surfaces and identities opened up in narrative, but in order to enact this most ethical, most personalizing of reading postures: attending, affirming, resonating with the plenitude and heterogeneity found across partibility and wholeness, found in love.

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<sup>362</sup> *Fragmentation and Memory*, 97

<sup>363</sup> *ibid* 98

<sup>364</sup> qtd in MacKendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory*, 105; from "Shattered Love"

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## Chapter 5

### *Concludo/Circumplico/Resolvo*

I have been asked to conclude this dissertation (*concludo*: to shut up, enclose, confine, and, thus, to bring to an end). And yet, this ending, this suturing, is precisely what this project resists. I am committed in this work to affirming the potential of the *unsutured*, the open, ruptured, exposed bodies of late-fourteenth century fabulous narrative, bodies who are so often made meaningful only across the closing of their openings, readable in their reorganization, or in the erasure of any presence in their partibility. Open bodies are in some cases left for dead, and perhaps this dissertation, left open, would also be relegated to the pile of the unreadable.

Beyond its subject of openness, this work is, by its dissertation-nature, temporally and spatially dispersed, extended across times and locations – Ithaca, Portland, Kalamazoo, London, Santa Barbara – written across spaces like libraries and archives, our porch which faced the woods, innumerable cafes, occasionally at the dining room table, in the hours when family’s attention was elsewhere. This dissertation was written across the various selves that came into being in and across those spaces, written across my own history, as scholar and woman. I am not she who began. And perhaps this disjunct, between past and present, and the selves conjured along the way, is that for which I am asked to account. Is there a narrative that tells the story of this dissertation, accounts for the movements across its chapters, and suggests a way forward, a future trajectory for this project (a DeleuzeGuattarian line of flight)? Once more, I am called to give an account. And for this final accounting – final, in this moment – I would rather turn to the image, not of the suture, but of the folding around (*circumplico*), a serpentine winding in which past and future touch as they circulate. This chapter should be, not a conclusion, but a re-solution (*resolvo*): an

unting, opening, dispersal, a release.

I began this project with two questions in mind. The first concerns identities as communal affiliations that seem to overflow the limits of self set for them, and I took as my archive medieval narratives of the late fourteenth century which are, famously, invested in questions of identity. For example, the *King of Tars* is commonly understood to present Saracens as black-skinned, animal-like, and changeable, while Christians are white-skinned, rational, and natural, ordinary, and inevitable. The *Siege of Jerusalem* is read as associating Jews with physical and theological corruption; while Christians, or Roman-Christians, are physically and theological incorruptible and invincible. The *Knight's Tale* and its subsequent readers present Emelye as a hyper-eroticized ideal, seamlessly moving from fierce Amazon to tamed and domesticated Athenian woman, without the backwards glance that has been the undoing of other willful women.

Yet, in each case, I found these identity distinctions to be neither natural nor static. The limits of these identifications – Christian, Saracen, Jew, heterosexual woman – are exactly what is at play in these narratives, exactly what is erased in the act of presentation; and the boundaries between communities of affiliation presented as opposite begin to blur in the act of conjuring them, embodying them. All selves are changeable in the *King of Tars*. Every body is corruptible in the *Siege of Jerusalem*, and capable of circulation from health to disease again. Emelye does, indeed, resist domestication in the *Knight's Tale*, retaining her Amazon past in her Athenian present in each of her narrative iterations. Identification is an unsettled and unsettling terrain in each of these narratives, a self rupture whose openness is not closed as the narrative ends, but persists, straight through my own readings.

While my first reading question concerned identities that cannot hold together across a narrative terrain, the second question had to do with bodies, the bodies that

appear insistently, significantly, in these narratives. Readers, myself included, respond to these bodies – the flesh ball child in the *King of Tars* is its most famous feature, as are the gruesomely tortured Jewish bodies in the *Siege*, as is, arguably, Emelye’s body as erotic ideal in the *Knights Tale* – while not always making sense of what these bodies are doing in these narratives. What function do these bodies perform in their narrative terrains; or, more proximately, to what exactly are readers, am I, responding as we draw close to, attend to, these bodies? To be sure, there are many other fabulous narratives of the period that contain potent corporeal moments – anthropophagy in *Richard Coer de Lyon* and *The Sege of Melayne*, the public display (and torture) of pregnant women in *Athelston*, becoming-Christian via becoming-dog in *Sir Gowther*, and the negotiation of Christian/Saracen identity on bodies in the *Sowdone of Babylon*. Yet, I’ve chosen three narratives for this study that contain some of the more graphic, more extreme of corporeal presentations. That is, I’ve chosen to understand what it means to have a body in medieval narrative by examining bodies of excess in that narrative terrain.

What I hope to have shown in this dissertation is that the excessive body becomes a potent figure for imaging the identitarian movability which is such an important feature of these stories. As I have written elsewhere, when the narrative comes up against an idea larger than the ability of propositional language to represent – in this case, the permeability and dispersal of identifications across the narrative terrain – the excessive body shows up to figure that movable self in flesh. The flesh ball – a body of excess in that its formless flesh exceeds any readable shape, any external signifier – figures the potentiality of any racial-religious identification to be transformed into an Other, providing a prehistory, in skin, of identification itself. The Jewish body – excessive in its replicating, opened surfaces – enfleshes the circulation of identity in the space of the rupture. Emelye’s body – excessive in its dispersal

across all of its transhistorical narrative iterations – illustrates the critical movement of remembering and partitioning anew that is one of the constitutive movements of identity construction. In all three narratives, these excessive bodies are conjured up, remembered, to be resolved (*resolvo*: opened, dissipated, revealed) in the perpetual mechanism of remaking a self prone to wander.

Moreover, these excessive bodies figure not only the movable subjectivities of embodied selves and their narrative mechanism of coherence, but also provide *poignant* moments in which the circulations of that flesh touch, undo other subjectivities in the narrative. That is, each of these figures enfleshes the potentiality of the opened, ruptured, or excessive body to mobilize the identifications of those bodies it contacts, evinces the potency of the touch of the excessive flesh. The touch of the flesh ball child unmoors all identities from their stability and futurity, as the narrative's Christians are drawn into the circulations of identity in which the narrative's Saracens also participate (that leads to the eventual erasure of all Saracens). Caiaphas' opened body initiates a complex circulation of sacred and profane, images introjected and abjected from Christian self-identification and pietistic practice, blurring the limits between the disciplinary and the holy and the bodies – Christian and Jew – meant to somatize these domains. Emelye's body, undone in her iterations in Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Fletcher and Shakespeare's versions of her, is shaken loose from generic and spatio-temporal constraints, to be the undoing of, the confounding of, readers like me.

What I have tried to suggest in this dissertation is a model of self-becoming that depends both on the body, and the body dispersed, open, circulating, devoid of readable features, to create a narrative picture of becoming-self that is peripatetic, that is as mobile or variable, even fragile, and certainly responsive, as the bodies upon which those selves materialize. In these narratives, I encounter figures of selfhood

that intermingle with the times and spaces in which they inhabit, however temporarily, figures of identity that are migratory and dispersed across the times and places in which they enact themselves and come into being again and again.

The implications are, of course, that the movements of these self migrations, transhistorical and trans-spatial as they are, come into contact with all other selves, even readerly selves, and refuse the strict divisions between subject and object, between past and present, between the literary and the flesh, that serve to shore up readers' own position as (post)modern scholars unmarked by the selves we interpret. Like the princess in the *King of Tars*, I have been undone by the touch of these excessive and enfleshed selves. These bodies and their mobile identifications call for response in me that mobilizes my own coming-into-being. I find that I am implicated in their movements, and that implication, a kind of solidarity in coming-into-being, to which I have arrived in the process of this dissertation coming into being (again, the image of birthing this dissertation-as-flesh-ball seems poignant here) has prompted me to think about modes of response to this enfleshed identity picture I have created in the preceding pages. If open, ruptured, dispersed bodies are spaces of identitarian plenitude and becoming, and if the potentiality of that openness implicates my own self, my mode of response to this mechanism of selfhood is at once both a question of critical and ethical response.

Encountering Emelye's ruptured body set me thinking about this response, alongside Cary's conference presentation on affirmation or praise in scholarship, Masha's call to turn towards the past with something other than, or in addition to, an eye towards trauma, and, of course, MacKendrick's work on plenitude in partibility. Further, contemporary scholarship that is interested in erasing the artificial divisions between the personal and the professional – in particular, the blog *In the Middle* – have extended productive invitations to consider at length how I am called into being

in facing the past, how I can productively encounter these embodied selves of the past with my present self in a way that does not press those bodies of the past into the service of a present ideology, nor erase my own subjectivity in the process of turning towards my work. A methodology that allows for transhistorical connections while taking into account the mobile, partible, and plural selves both then and now.

To this point, I have provided a kind of narrative of the historical and critical development of this project, outlining how I think the preceding chapters cohere and how I got from chapter one to chapter four and beyond. If I am to account for what comes after, to speak to and for a future self continuing this project along future trajectories, I can gesture at what comes next. I would like to continue to unfold a reading practice that centers on the open and ruptured excessive body, not as a plane of abyssal negation or disciplinary containment (or not *exclusively* as those things), but as a potential space of plenitude and identity coming-into-being, to tease out a reading methodology that affirms, resonates, draws close to, the identities it names. I would like to employ a reading practice that brings the professional and the personal into productive exchange, not as dogma, but as a mode of inquiry that I feel makes clearest the subjective situatedness of all scholarship, of all scholars. Specifically, as a starting place for revision, I would like to return to the *Siege of Jerusalem*, to allow this present self to encounter both the bodies and selves of that narrative as well as to encounter the former me that could not quite resonate with Caiaphas, or with the other Jews eviscerated in that landscape. I would like to think about what it would mean to draw close to those bodies, what is at stake in touching that past? I think the answer to these unsettling questions would contribute to an understanding of how and why we bring ourselves to what we study, and how our own embodied selves are always implicated in the bodies we interpret.

I have also been encouraged to consider how authority participates in this

model of identity, to think about what I mean by identity at all. I would also like to be more specific about my distinctions between flesh, skin, and body. And I continue to be interested in what it means to have a self, and to write about that self, in my academic work. Who is this “I” whom I assert – in this paper, in a recent conference paper taken from chapter four – and how is it different from any other “I” that may exist in the flesh, in history? If I believe that this scholarly “I” is not less rhetorically constructed than any of the other narrative selves about which I write, if in fact I am bringing these selves alongside each other, it is useful to consider how I can strategically deploy self-iterations in my work. This self-consciousness, and the transgressed distance between self and narrative identities, in my mind constitutes the greatest shift across this dissertation, prompting in its turn a reading practice informed by compassion and affirmation. The way forward, then, is a turning back, to reconnect, to live anew into the future while drawing close to the proximities of the past and the embodied selves that inhabit then and now.