

SEXED BEING AND THE LIMIT: WRITING TRANSGENDER SUBJECTIVITY

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Shanna Carlson

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## SEXED BEING AND THE LIMIT: WRITING TRANSGENDER SUBJECTIVITY

Shanna Carlson, Ph. D.

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My dissertation, “Sexed Being and the Limit: Writing Transgender Subjectivity,” draws on French medieval and early modern literature, contemporary United States memoir, and the discourses of gender studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and queer theory, to argue for an understanding of “transgender subjectivity” that would be irreducible to the fields of “sex,” gender identity, or gender expression. I suggest that we may read the cross-dressed or “transgender” characters of the French medieval texts I consider as *allegorical subjects*, or subjects whose “subjectivity” is manifested in the texts’ portrayals of these characters’ encounters with the limits of language. By “the limits of language,” I mean to refer to the ways in which language introduces into subjective existence both an intractable limit and, at the same time, an excess which language itself cannot fully treat. Each medieval text, I argue, stages its inability to explain the “sexed being” of the trans character in question in scenes that explore the limits of language (scenes of voice, silence, naming, re-naming, or deception, limits that are both painful and enabling). I suggest that transgender subjectivity can be understood as a particular response to language’s inability to explain the “sexed being” of the subject, a response which orbits the paradoxical status of language and its limits.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shanna Carlson was born in Elk River, Minnesota. After moving around for several years, her family settled in Fargo, North Dakota. She studied Cultural Studies/Comparative Literature and French at Smith College and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities before joining the Romance Studies Department at Cornell. As a doctoral student at Cornell, Shanna has focused on French medieval literature, queer theory, transgender studies, and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

To Elisa, Andresa, Mom, Dad, Yoran, Bob, and Linda; to all the kitties, the Carlsons,  
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## INTRODUCTION

### The Subject: Medieval, Modern, Trans At Least Two Frames

#### **Introduction**

It is perhaps fitting (albeit, as ever, awkwardly fitting) that a project about “transgender subjectivity” should resist framing. Fitting, too, to be led to a hesitation – is the aim really to frame the thing at all or, instead, to provide some perhaps contingent point of entry into the content or the project’s own “corporeal contingency” (Paul Verhaeghe, “Lacan’s Answer to the Classical Mind/Body Deadlock: Retracing Freud’s *Beyond*” 114)? Are the two any different? The metaphors can be thought oppositionally (structure and contingency, form and content; frame and entry, epidermis and pore), but need not be; likewise, they can seem to warrant differing methodologies. In general, this project seeks, and is in many ways about, a balance between such pairings. Drawing from the polyvalence of a word like “corpus,” it errs toward a structuralism infused with corporeal contingencies, where *fond* and *forme* might coil and uncoil in “circular but nonreciprocal relation” (Verhaeghe 110).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This could be read as a definition of structuralism itself. In outlining the differences between structuralism and formalism, Claude Lévi-Strauss defines structuralism as a discourse where there is no opposition between the “abstract” and the “concrete” or the “structure” and the “content”: “The supports of structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology are often accused of formalism. This is to forget that formalism exists as an independent doctrine from which structuralism – without denying its debt to it – separated because of the very different attitudes the two schools adopt toward the concrete. Contrary to formalism, structuralism refuses to set the concrete against the abstract and to recognize a privileged value in the latter. *Form* is defined by opposition to material other than itself. But *structure* has no distinct content; it is content itself, apprehended in a logical organization conceived as property of the real” (*Structural Anthropology, Volume 2* 115). Later, he adds, “[Vladimir] Propp divides oral literature in two: a form, which constitutes the essential aspect because it lends itself to morphological study; and an arbitrary content to which, because it is arbitrary, I think he only gives an accessory importance. We will be permitted to insist on this point which sums up the whole difference between formalism and structuralism. For the former, the two domains must be absolutely separate,

Above all, it seems fitting that at least two frames come to mind, and that they should imperfectly overlap. In the first place, this project considers transgender subjectivity with respect to debates between gender studies<sup>2</sup> and Lacanian psychoanalysis about sex, gender, and sexual difference. In the second, it considers transgender subjectivity as a point of fractious contact between French medieval and contemporary theoretical and narrative accounts of gender, “sexed” being, and subjectivity. The terms in these two lists differ for reasons I will try to delineate, but suffice it to say for the moment that these differences already index the extent to which these discourses only imperfectly overlap. In both instances, I hope 1) to explore what these divergent discourses might, through disagreement, dissymmetry, and the occasional happy accident, offer to each other and to contemporary imaginings about subjects’ solutions to the impasses of “sex,” “speaking,” and “being”; and 2) to map out some thoughts on how “transgender subjectivity” allows us to ask differently the question of subjectivity itself.

To begin with the first frame noted above: I attempt to stage a debate between gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis around the categories of sexual difference and transgender subjectivity, categories which have served as points of contention for the two discourses, but which also constitute dense sites of contestation in

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since form alone is intelligible, and content is only a residual deprived of any significant value. For structuralism, this opposition does not exist. There is not something abstract on one side and something concrete on the other. Form and content are of the same nature, susceptible to the same analysis. Content draws its reality from its structure and what is called form is the ‘structural formation’ of the local structure forming the content” (131). Structuralism, in other words, loves its objects, while, according to Lévi-Strauss, “*Formalism destroys its object*” (132).

<sup>2</sup> “Gender studies,” however, is not one thing. I use the term “gender studies” here to outline rather loosely the study of sex, gender, and sexuality, such that it might also comprise both “queer theory” and “transgender studies.” However, these three fields are not ideologically assimilable and do not constitute monolithic structures in and of themselves either. I will try to signal which “gender studies” I mean as I go.

contemporary debates about kinship, marriage, and family, hate crimes and nondiscrimination policies, and persons' legal status as such.<sup>3</sup> In response to concerns expressed by theorists Judith Butler and Joan Copjec regarding the incompatibility of gender studies' and Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches, I argue that these approaches may hope for meeting grounds precisely around the topic of "sexual difference," and that, more specifically, questions about transgender subjectivities afford a point of entry for thinking through the impasses and political purchase of a necessarily contestatory meeting of these two domains. "Sexual difference," I argue, following Lacan, refers not to "biological sex" or "gender" but to a subject's position with respect to language. Sexual difference in this account would be a logic and a mode of inscription, one whose effects may be traced to diverse phenomena. "Biological sex" or "gender," by contrast, would appear as manifestations of the imaginary body, or that body which comes into being for the subject itself through what Lacan describes as the mirror stage.<sup>4</sup> This is the body of ideology, composed of images and ideals, the body imagined as container or whole, which forgets itself as a sack of flesh, holes, and

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<sup>3</sup> As Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter write in the Introduction to *Transgender Rights*, "In short, while gains won by the U.S. transgender movement are impressive, most transgender people still are deprived of any secure legal status. In the eyes of the law in most states, they are nonpersons, with no right to marry, work, use a public bathroom, or even walk down the street in safety" (xiv).

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, "[a]n image, for a human being, is always an image correlated with and regulated by the symbolic function" (Marie-Hélène Brousse, "The Imaginary" 122), meaning that no purely imaginary body exists. In Chapters Two and Three, I discuss identification and its various means of alienation (particularly, in these chapters, with respect to gender). For a discussion of Freud's concept of the bodily ego and how it might be useful to thinking transgender subjectivity, see Gayle Salamon, "The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material" in *Assuming a Body*. For a discussion of the difference between the "real" "organic" body and the psychoanalytic "real," see Geneviève Morel, "Psychoanalytical Anatomy." Morel's account, however, presents the problem of imagining transsexuality in a transphobic manner. For a discussion of the political uses of rethinking the imaginary (body), see Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. For a critique of the usefulness of rethinking the imaginary, see Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, especially pages 21-28.

drives; this is the body as basis of the ego, which “will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming” (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 76), meaning, roughly put, that no matter how close the two – ego and subject – may appear in space, they will never converge.

I further argue for an understanding of “transgender subjectivity” which also transcends both “gender identity”<sup>5</sup> (or “gender expression”) and “biology.” According to this understanding, the transgender subjectivity of interest to this project<sup>6</sup> would be one possible response to what Lacan calls “the failure of the sexual relation,” which can also be glossed as “relationality’s failure as such” (Tim Dean, “Homosexuality” 137). In Chapter One, I suggest that we might read transgender subjectivity as equivalent to what Lacan names a “hysterical,” “feminine,” or “not-all” position

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<sup>5</sup> In this way, I see my work articulating in part with the move, cited by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore in their Introduction to *WSQ*’s issue on “trans-”, to move beyond discussions of “trans-” centered exclusively on gender: “While gender certainly – perhaps inevitably – remains a primary analytical category for the work we sought to publish in this feminist scholarly journal, our aim in curating this special issue specifically was not to identify, consolidate, or stabilize a category of class of people, things, or phenomena that could be denominated ‘trans,’ as if certain concrete somethings could be characterized as ‘crossers,’ while everything else could be characterized by boundedness and fixity. It seemed especially important to insist upon this point when addressing transgender phenomena... In seeking to promote cutting-edge feminist work that builds on existing transgender-oriented scholarship to articulate new generational and analytical perspectives, we didn’t want to perpetuate a minoritizing or ghettoizing use of ‘transgender’ to delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices in a way that rendered them the exclusive property of a tiny class of marginalized individuals” (11). It is interesting to note that, in such conversations, “gender” is being dislodged, to a certain extent, from its position of primacy; as they state, “we have assembled in this special issue of *WSQ* work we consider to be ‘doubly trans’ in some important sense – work that situates ‘trans-’ in relation to transgender yet moves beyond the narrow politics of gender identity” (15).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout, I will try to be consistent in speaking of “the transgender subjectivity of interest to this project,” not “transgender subjectivity as such.” I will sometimes omit the extra words in the interest of narrative flow. My reason for distinguishing between the two concepts should be clear: I am not trying to offer a definitive understanding that would be applicable to all transgender people. First of all, it would be impossible to define “all transgender people”; second, people who identify as transgender may or may not find that they have anything in common with the issues considered herein (the interrogation of gender; uncertainty; encounters with the limits of language; experiences of the effects of language on the body). Finally, people who may not identify as transgender may find that they do have something in common with the issues considered herein.

within language.<sup>7</sup> For subjects thusly positioned in language, “gender” often emerges as an object of intense inquiry: the hysteric asks, “Am I a man, or am I a woman, and what does that mean?” Gender, in other words, emerges as a privileged vehicle through which the feminine/hysterical/not-all/transgender subject interrogates that failure of relationality that institutes the subject as desiring. Gender emerges as a plane on which the question of sexual difference can be interpreted, interrogated, or embodied as problem. However, gender is not for this reason equivalent to sexual difference. The conceptual differences between “gender” and “sexual difference” constitute difficult terrain, as the two seem endlessly to collapse into one another (even, sometimes, in psychoanalytic discourse, which insists on the difference); this difference is hard to think. The hysteric’s question brings into blazing focus, however, both how counterintuitive and how critical it is to think the two apart. We might say that the hysteric thinks gender and sexual difference together, but uncomfortably; he/she/ze exposes their difference or incommensurability even as he/she/ze seeks to answer the question of sexual difference (What does it mean to be a [divided, castrated/desiring] subject [in language]?) by means of a question about gender (Which of these social identities might explain me as a subject?).

In this initial sketch of what I mean by the term “transgender subjectivity,” I would like to stress three points. First, it is worth restating that sexual difference is not equivalent to gender. To break down the difference to its simplest expression, we might state it thusly: sexual difference, for Lacan, is a position within language (to be “all” or “not-all” “under the phallic function” [*Encore* 79-80]) and gender is not. Of

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<sup>7</sup> Hysteria and femininity are not exactly the same things for Lacanian psychoanalysis; for the differences between them, see Chapter One.

course, one's gender identity or expression expresses something about an *individual's* position within language, where language stands for not only language as such but the social positions it bestows. We have learned how gender, along with race, class, sexual orientation, age, and ability, impact one's position within language as it is thusly conceived from feminists as variously situated as Dorothy Allison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Hélène Cixous, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susan Stryker, Riki Wilchins, and Monique Wittig. Gender identity or expression expresses something about an individual's position within language to the extent that social norms to date have dictated that "men" – particularly white, middle class ones – have occupied a more secure site than "women" within language. Likewise, white middle class women have occupied a more secure site in language than poor and working class women and women of color. But the kind of language at issue in each of the above examples is a rather different sort of language than the one Lacan is describing when he speaks of the phallic function.

While gender communicates something about an individual's position within language, gender does not in and of itself constitute a question of *subjective* position within language, whether the language in question be that aligned with Lacan's phallic function or something closer to what feminists such as Cixous and Lorde describe. This is the case because gender norms can, after all, be variously expressed. We can imagine a society where one's gender expression would have no bearing on one's status within language – a society where all the available forms of gender expression would render subjects equally fragile or equally secure within language. This would

not be a society without difference; instead, it would be one where the kinds of difference that made the difference – those differences that positioned some subjects securely within language and other subjects more tenuously (or, in the terms of Copjec, the differences that would position some subjects “on the side of the symbolic” and others “on the side of the void” [“The Fable of the Stork” 72]) – would not have anything to do with gender.

The second point I would like to stress is the following: not all “not-all” subjects ask the question of sexual difference in the guise of a critique of or question about gender. The subjects of interest to this study – or, more appropriately, the literary characters of interest to this study, which I qualify as allegorical subjects, a point to which I’ll return – will concern themselves, to greater or lesser degrees, with problems of gender; however, subjects *may* ask the question of sexual difference in many different ways. Certain questions thus lurk in the background of this project: *Why* does gender emerge as a privileged vehicle through which the “not-all” subject interrogates the failure of relationality? How will the question of sexual difference – or the question of the failure of relationality – transform as the sense and status of gender transform too? Will the question – “Am I a man, or am I a woman” – retain its psychic and cultural hold? Will it fade? Will it become even more widespread? In this area, Patricia Ghoervici’s recent clinical work on hysteria and transgender proves invaluable, as she argues in *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratization of Transgenderism* that hysterics today ask not “Am I a man, or am I a woman?” but “Am I straight, or am I bisexual?” (xii). What does



this shift mean? And what does it mean if the hysteric's question is transforming at the very moment that transgender is emerging as an increasingly visible identity?

Finally, while I speak throughout of “transgender subjectivity,” this is, psychoanalytically speaking, a resounding misnomer, for the subject has no demographic. To speak of a subject with a gender – even an ambiguous one – is to bring the world of images and ideals, identities and social being, into the much queerer space of the subject; again, according to Lacan, the ego “will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming.” This, however, is partly why the structure of hysteria is so interesting, for hysterics, again, seem to think gender and sexual difference, or social identities and that which necessitates their failures, *together* precisely because they are sensitive to their *incommensurability*. In speaking of “transgender subjectivity,” I am attempting to push the word “transgender” beyond its traditional connotations, in order to argue that *transgender* (in the sense here considered, one instantiation of hysteria) figures *in discourse* something that is germane to subjectivity as such – notably, the notion that to be a sexed subject is to be subsumed in an irreducible uncertainty. In a certain sense, the transgender subjectivity of interest to this project poses a question which is, at a certain level, present for all subjects, no matter their seeming genders and no matter their degree of gender certainty or, as Gherovici writes, “happy uncertainty” (185). This is a point I will return to. While this suggests that there is a way of thinking subjectivity as such as transgender, the stories I consider feature characters who explore this question at the level of the social, bringing the singularity of their experience of the impossibility of

sexed being into the fields of gendered embodiment, social relations, and, in some cases, political engagement.

While Lacanian psychoanalysis furnishes the provocative idea that “sexual difference” might be understood as a position within language rather than a gender-based identity, it is the field of gender studies (in its many forms) that explores gender as an object of inquiry. It is gender studies and not, generally, psychoanalysis which treats the diverse phenomena of gender to bold and careful consideration. It is gender studies which is both interested in and – in many instances if not all – sympathetic to transgender phenomena (or the visible manifestations, social repercussions, and critical theories of gender ambiguity, transition, transgression, and non-normativity) and transgender subjectivities. To my mind, those of us who are interested in posing the question of (trans)gender do so in part in order to ask the same question that Jess Goldberg addresses to his old friend Duffy at the end of *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg’s groundbreaking trans narrative, namely: “I came to ask you if you think it’s possible to change the world?” (299). This project builds from the premise that such a pursuit requires at least two levels of labor: in the words of psychoanalytic thinker Charles Shepherdson, “the symbolic is not a set of conditions external to the subject, and..., as a result, the subject who labors to change the world is already its product. The notion of a ‘change in the symbolic,’ understood as ‘outside’ the subject, must therefore be supplemented by a ‘change in the subject’ as well” (*Vital Signs* 39).

If psychoanalytic thinkers have been, by and large, unwilling to think transgender, those narrating and/or theorizing transgender have not, for their part, called upon psychoanalysis either; this means, among other things, that these latter

have neither offered an account of the limits of language nor made use of the resources of a theory of the subject.<sup>8</sup> This observation is not in and of itself unique: psychoanalytic critics like Copjec and Tim Dean have already critiqued gender theorist Judith Butler, for example, in this capacity.<sup>9</sup> While I will address what as I read as the resources of a theory of the subject in this Introduction, I will not directly address what I mean by the expression “the limits of language” until Chapter Five, where I will respond to Copjec’s critique of Butler. In the essays where Copjec and Dean engage in the aforementioned critiques, neither one is particularly interested in nor sympathetic to transgender subjectivity. Consequently, they do not experiment with bringing these categories to bear with respect to critical theories of transgender or to transgender narratives more generally. I hope to respond to that lacuna, with the understanding that psychoanalysis and transgender – each in its own way having to do with the impasse of “sexual difference,” and in this way potentially mutually authenticating discourses – have much to offer one another. In this way, I see my work as conversant with that of gender theorist Gayle Salamon, who argues, in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, that “psychoanalysis,

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<sup>8</sup> As Susan Stryker rightly observes in her introduction to Charles Shepherdson’s “The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, “While psychoanalysis has a great deal to offer in terms of understanding how the human organism becomes a gendered subject, the perceived dilemma of the psychoanalyst treating the transsexual patient reveals a profound struggle. Whose sense of meaning and reality, the analyst’s or the analysand’s, should have the power to actualize itself? The analyst, situating himself or herself as a voice of cultural authority, insists that his or her body means differently, and wants the body to acquire a social and cultural meaning that corresponds with a subjectively held gender identity. It is this impasse that creates such antipathy toward psychoanalysis on the part of so many transgender people, whose struggle to control their own bodies has been far better served by medical service providers willing to change the *soma*, and not try to change the self” (94).

<sup>9</sup> For Dean’s most sustained critique of Butler, see “Bodies That Mutter” in *Beyond Sexuality*. I will outline Copjec’s critique of Butler in Chapter Five. Butler, of course, for all her influence, does not represent the last word on transgender phenomena. See Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* for an extensive critique of Butler. See Salamon’s “The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material” in *Assuming a Body* for a response to Prosser’s critique.

perhaps more than any other discourse, has provided the most thorough and detailed examination of the elaborate set of mechanisms by which a subject ‘knows’ her own body, and psychoanalysis can give us a richly productive way of describing that join between the psychic and the material – if its more homophobic and transphobic tendencies can be curbed” (3-4).<sup>10</sup>

While Salamon thoughtfully rethinks the materiality of all bodies, pointing out that “the body one feels oneself to have is not necessarily the same body that is delimited by its exterior contours, and... this is the case even for any normatively gendered subject” (3), my own project puts more weight on the textual. I turn to literary texts as objects of study, leaving open the question as to whether or not there might be any “subjects” *in* literature, in order to track literary ways of grappling with and portraying the impact of language on (trans) subjectivity. I argue that the impact of language on (trans) subjectivity is explored in the texts’ preoccupation with bodily effects, as well as in the (trans) characters’ own use of language. If there are no (trans) subjects in literature – a view which I do not easily endorse, to the extent that it relies on a clear divide between something called “literature” and something called “not-literature,” but a view whose common sense force I neither deny –, there are nonetheless trans poetics, forged out of these texts’ depictions of trans characters’ encounters with the limits of language. Moreover, these – the impact of language on

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<sup>10</sup> Salamon calls on psychoanalysis, queer theory, transgender theory, and phenomenology to think embodiment, the material and the phantasmatic, and the productive ways in which all bodies experience rupture and disjunction in being called upon to construct their own “felt sense.” As Salamon explains, “I rely on the notion of the phantom or ambivalent presence to complicate suppositions about the nature of the bodily being, where that phantom is sometimes textual and sometimes material” (2), for “those immaterial structures which subtend the body’s materiality, such as the felt sense that delivers the body to consciousness, cannot be accounted for within a theory that understands the body to be a plenitude of materiality and meaning” (3).

the body, the limits of language and how one will position oneself with respect to this – constitute, in Lacanian terms, matters of the subject. I would like to suggest, therefore, that we may read the transgender characters of the French medieval texts I consider as allegorical subjects, or characters whose “subjectivity” is poetically manifested – or fabulated – in their encounters with the limits of language and with language’s impact on the body.

### I. “Sex” and “Gender” in Medieval France

This project also represents an attempt to think medieval literary representations of transgender subjectivity with Lacanian psychoanalysis. But, as already noted, are there literary representations of transgender subjectivity? Are there literary representations of subjectivity as such? And why turn to French medieval literary texts for an articulation of transgender subjectivity – why with psychoanalysis? – when these (transgender, psychoanalysis) are clear anachronisms and, therefore, concepts and methodologies that could travel anywhere, anytime?<sup>11</sup> If we can say,

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<sup>11</sup> For a wealth of excellent scholarship addressing the relations amongst history and structure; medievalism, historicism, and psychoanalysis; and medievalism and contemporary critical theory at large, see for reference Teresa Brennan’s *History After Lacan*; William Burgwinkle’s *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230*; Brigitte Cazelles and Charles Méla’s *Modernité au Moyen Âge: le défi du passé*; Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith’s *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory*; Joan Copjec’s *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*; Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Politics and Getting Medieval*; L. O. Aranye Fradenburg’s *Sacrifice Your love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* and “We Are Not Alone: Psychoanalytic Medievalisms”; Bruce Holsinger’s *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*; Jean-Charles Hûchet’s *Littérature Médiévale et Psychanalyse*; Sarah Kay’s *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century and Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*; the work of Alexandre Leupin in general; Erin Felicia Labbie’s *Lacan’s Medievalism*; Gayle Margherita’s *The Romance of Origins*; Elizabeth Scala’s “Historicists and Their Discontents: Reading Psychoanalytically in Medieval Studies”; Shepherdson’s “Derrida and Lacan: An Impossible Friendship?”; Paul Strohm’s *Theory and the Premodern Text*; Eugene Vance’s “Medievalism: Testing Ground for Historicism(s)? Round table discussion with Peter Haidu, Alexandre Leupin, and Eugene Vance”; and Paul Zumthor’s *Toward a Medieval Poetics*. For scholarship addressing both psychoanalysis and transgender, see for reference Patricia Gherovici’s *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism*;

with medievalists like L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, that “‘psychoanalysis is simply *in* medieval studies now, in a variety of acknowledged and unacknowledged ways’” (qtd. in Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism* 9); if we can say in turn, with Erin Felicia Labbie, that “[m]utual implication will lead to an inversion of Fradenburg’s statement, ‘psychoanalysis is in medieval studies,’ to say as well that *medieval studies is in psychoanalysis*” (10); and if we can say, with Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith, challenging philosopher Hans Blumenberg, that “‘[m]odernity and postmodernity have defined themselves *toward* the Middle Ages and they will never let it go’” (“Outside Modernity” 24) – if we can say all these things, what can we say about transgender, psychoanalysis, and the medieval?

I turn to French medieval literary representations of transgender subjectivity for two primary reasons. First, medieval stances on “sex” and “gender,” as Joan Cadden shows in *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, do not constitute any sort of unified discourse: “authorities” on the subject are numerous and dispersed; those very authorities draw on eclectic sources; and those sources are, themselves, oftentimes syncretistic. To my mind, this makes of French medieval attempts to grapple with the question of “sex” and gender particularly compelling, for they are, in a sense, “real” attempts, as in, attempts with no secure center, attempts which do not have a hegemonic discourse to which to respond. Given that I am interested in narratives that bring to light the idea that to be a “sexed being” as such is to be

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Dean’s “Transcending Gender” in *Beyond Sexuality*; Millot’s *Horsexe*; Salamon’s *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*; and Shepherdson’s “The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex” in *Vital Signs*.

For scholarship addressing medieval literature and transgender, see Masha Raskolnikov’s “Transgendering Pride.” Jumping ahead to scholars working on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, see Lewis Seifert’s “Border Crossings: For a Transgendered Choisy.” For Seifert’s approach to the problem of anachronism, see page 211.

subsumed in an irreducible uncertainty, then narratives dating from a time period where a discourse rendering gender a matter of certainty is not easily at hand, renders that uncertainty all the more palpable. Second, I am interested in pursuing the proposition made by Peter Haidu that the modern Western subject was invented in the European Middle Ages; for Haidu, this is in no small part a literary invention that has also to do with the origins of the modern state. But what does the subject that Haidu finds in the European medieval state have to do with the subject as it is conceptualized in Lacanian psychoanalysis?

To begin with the first of these: Cadden's invaluable study on medieval views of what she calls, for the most part, "sex difference," carefully amasses and analyzes countless sources, beginning with ancient Greek texts that proved significant to medieval thinkers and moving on to medieval medicine, natural philosophy, scholastic philosophy, moral philosophy, Christian doctrine, and literature, with the heaviest emphasis on the first two of these. Cadden suggests that her eclectic approach to the gathering of "questions, information, and methods" is, itself, medieval; it "mirrors the habits of medieval natural philosophers and medical writers" (4). Her wide berth also leads her early on to distinguish her aims and conclusions from the ideas about medieval sex, gender, and sexuality rendered familiar by Michel Foucault and Thomas Laqueur. As she notes, "Foucault used the Middle Ages mainly as a foil..." (8); with respect to Laqueur, she explains, "Though there is much evidence in the present study that fits [Laqueur's] 'one sex' model, medieval views on the status of the uterus and the opinions of medieval physiognomers about male and female traits suggest

evidence of other models not reducible to Laqueur's" (3). The refrain of Cadden's own view, by contrast, is nicely captured in the Introduction:

There is no coherent set of concepts that can be said to constitute the medieval gender framework. Similarly, the vast and evolving body of knowledge which constituted medieval medicine and natural philosophy – the repository of much of what we would call 'science' – did not offer a single model of the sexes, much less one which could be said to shape or to be derived from a clear system of gender roles (2).

Lacking a "coherent set of concepts" on medieval gender does not prevent Cadden from explaining a number of patterns, of course, and her Conclusion is confident: certain principles guide medicine and natural philosophy in their explorations of and varied conclusions about sex difference. These include "the operations of heat... the concepts of moderation and balance, with their attendant notion of purgation, and the sets of ideas associated with teleology and value hierarchies, such as the conviction that regular operations in nature are purposeful and good" (280).

If, as Cadden cautions, medieval stances on sex and gender cannot in any way be summarized, medieval views on what we might today call "transgender" phenomena are just as difficult to encapsulate; however, according to Cadden, "The notion of a masculine female or a feminine male is not uncommon in the late Middle Ages" (201). Similarly, there are theorizations of so-called "hermaphrodites," such as in "the doctrine of the seven-celled uterus" (198):

The uterus, so the theory goes, is divided into seven cubicles, three on the left side, three on the right side, and one in the center. A conceptus housed in one of the cubicles on the left, the cooler side, would, of course, be a girl; on the right, a boy. A fetus that developed in the middle cell would be a hermaphrodite. The anatomists of twelfth-century Salerno secured a place in medieval medicine for the theory by presenting it in their general anatomical tracts... (198).



Cadden emphasizes that there are “middle terms admitted by medical theory” (202) – middle terms that could be applied not only to person but “to plants and planets, cruel mothers and kind confessors” (202) – but that these middle terms also “worked to contain experience and expression within the two-term system” (202). Furthermore, Cadden notes that the acknowledgement of “naturalistic explanations” (209) for “[p]hysically ambiguous organisms and behaviorally ambiguous individuals” (209) did not prevent both of the above from being met with “less acceptance than discomfort or even hostility” (209).

Cadden turns to the twelfth century writings of Alan of Lille to demonstrate the hostility and discomfort with which non-normative bodies were encountered. As Cadden notes, there is a certain medieval “tolerance of sexual ambiguity and gender mixes” (209), but, to Cadden’s mind, this tolerance is restricted to the world of “cultural abstractions” (209): “If Jupiter and Ganymede can sleep together, asked the philosopher and poet Alan of Lille in the twelfth century, why are men condemned for sexual relations with each other? Because (he had the character Nature answer) poetry and allegory are not to be taken literally and have entirely different rules from those of everyday life” (209). Yet even ostensible real-life examples of transgender are not, it would seem, to be taken literally: “neither Joan of Arc, to take a lay example, nor the bearded Saint Wilgefortis<sup>12</sup>, to take a religious one, could be held up as a literal model for ordinary women” (212).

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<sup>12</sup> One of septuplets, Wilgefortis is thought to have been a hermaphrodite; like the saint in the story we will study in Chapter Two, Wilgefortis runs away from marriage to devote herself to God instead and eventually grows a beard and mustache (Cadden 203-204).

Just as Cadden resists generalizing about medieval views on sex and gender, we might hesitate to generalize about medieval views on what we might today call “transgender” phenomena. That said, it seems safe to say, at a minimum, that medieval European literature evidences a fascination with cross-dressing and the possibility of sex and/or gender change. Does it also evidence a certain surprising comfort with both of the above? It certainly seems to *in literature*. Alan of Lille seems to suggest this too, even as he then moves, through the character of Nature, to insist on the proper jurisdiction of poetry and allegory: what is permissible in poetry is not acceptable to everyday life. The textual traces of these phenomena are various: for example, according to Valerie R. Hotchkiss, “In the Middle Ages, female cross dressing was a common literary device and a significant, although rarely recorded, historical phenomenon” (*Clothes Make the Main* 3). She adds that “[f]emale transvestism occurs so frequently in medieval texts that feminine stereotypes, women’s roles in literature, and the perception of women in the Middle Ages warrant reexamination in light of it” (3-4). To this I would add that, given that the phenomenon is so common, it also asks us to consider the possibility that “female cross dressing” is not only a reflection on the status of “women” but, indeed, on the “men” – or “transmen” – these “women” become, as well as on medieval views on embodiment and social identification as such.

If it is not, in the European Middle Ages, universally decided how sex or gender come to be, it seems logical that variations on sex and gender might figure in debates and discussions about sex and gender, and that these questions and variations would find a place in the medieval imaginary and medieval literature. To my mind,

the variety of trans narratives in medieval texts, the befuddling mix of medieval theorizations of sex and gender, and the unexpected tones of acceptance with which cross-dressing and sex/gender change are encountered in some of these texts, make of medieval Europe a propitious environment for the exploration of transgender subjectivity. Yet there have been very few studies linking medieval “transgender” phenomena to modern transgender phenomena. This project is an experiment in forging that link.

The lack of a unified discourse on sex and gender gets played out in different ways in the narratives I consider. In the case of Heldris de Cornualle’s thirteenth century romance the *Roman de Silence*, debate over the trans main character Silence’s gender is quite literal: the allegorical figures of Nature and Nurture vie for his/her/hir body and identity. By contrast, the anonymous thirteenth century saint’s life the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* says little about Euphrosine/Esmerade’s gender as such: Euphrosine makes the decision to cross-dress fairly easily, in order to escape an unwanted marriage and devote him/her/hirself to God. Yet Euphrosine/Esmerade’s identity is just as radically in question as is Silence’s – indeed, we might say, more so, and more poetically so. The vita offers a series of metaphors and possible identifications to describe the character, most of which are only ambiguously related to gender: he/she/ze is a rock, a flower, a beast, a gem, a jewel, a creature, a thing, a eunuch, a monk, a bride, a saint, a boy – and, apparently, all these at once. What these medieval tales have in common is a provocative inability: they are unable to explain Silence’s or Euphrosine/Esmerade’s “sexed” beings. In the case of the *Roman de Silence*, this inability is playfully worried over throughout the romance. In the case of

the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*, this inability is unrolled into the crafting of an elusive sort of being, making of Euphrosine/Esmerade, as we shall see, in Karmen MacKendrick's terms, a perfect saint.

The above speaks to the meeting of transgender and medieval literature, but not to that of transgender, medieval literature, and psychoanalysis. Here, the linchpin lies, I think, in the tenuous category of subjectivity itself and its variously charged relations to language and literature; it lies in a certain way in which French medieval literary explorations of transgender subjectivity – flowering at the same time as the celebrated “courtly love” phenomenon – imagine, in literature, sites for a form of subjectivity otherwise not quite possible. While I recognize that, in a certain sense, there are no subjects in literature, I would like to suggest that French medieval literary texts carve out a space for a kind of subjectivity that the social did not quite allow for; these texts bring trans subjects into narrative “being.” Thus while we do not encounter the language of an actual transgender subject in the fictional texts I will consider, we do encounter a literary attempt at materializing a space for the subject outside of the social, and a space for a very particular sort of subject. The textual residue or poetic materialization of the social impossibility of transgender subjectivity can be found in the texts' very spatiality: the stories take place outside the law, in forests and monasteries. The residue can also be found in a certain preoccupation with the very humanity of the trans characters in question: the word “*chose*,” or “thing,” appears in all of the literary texts I consider as a means of describing or interrogating the trans character(s) in question.

Medieval questions about the humanity of trans characters ring, of course, disturbingly close to home for those of us interested in gender in the United States today: Currah, Juang, and Minter remind us that transpeople in the U.S. today “are nonpersons, with no right to marry, work, use a public bathroom, or even walk down the street in safety” (xiv). The medieval texts I consider do not frame the question in precisely the same terms, but they ask a series of questions which stretch across time. First: What is a human and what is a thing? Gender studies and these medieval literary texts cross paths here, asking after the extent to which the human is only intelligible as something other than a “thing” to the extent to which it is gendered. These medieval texts also cross paths with psychoanalysis here, opening together onto further questions, notably, what is “thingly” about the human? And what is “thingly” about a human that can and in fact must be articulated in art rather than in the social? If psychoanalysis and medieval literature cross paths here, they do so not only, as Lacan noted, in courtly love poetry, but in these stories, stories about a very particular sort of impossible subject – the transgender subject.

## **II. *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Peter Haidu***

If subjects are subjects, as Lacan asserts, because of the fact of language, this is as true of the medieval period as it is today. In this sense, the subject is transhistorical. However, subjects are not transhistorically the same kinds of subjects: as medievalist William Burgwinkle writes with respect to the subject positions available to twelfth century monks,

If individuals only accede to subjectivity through interaction with the Law – ideological forces that are attempting to harness and dominate them – then it is

logical to assume that the medieval clerks and monks who wrote these (largely homophobic) texts were *subjects in this modern sense, even if*, given the different forms that those ideological forces took, *the subject positions available to them were not identical to our own* (9, emphasis added).

Although Burgwinkle focuses on the significance of “the Law” – rather than language more generally – to subjectivity, his explanation applies to the context of this project as well: subjects are subjects according to the kinds of subject positions available to them. They may be “subjects in this modern sense,” but the solutions to the fact of subjection to language are themselves historical. What kinds of subjectivities, then, do medieval subjects embody?

Haidu, in the first sentence of *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, asserts that “[t]he modern subject was invented in the Middle Ages, such is the thesis of this book...” (1), and for Haidu, literature is central to this invention. Specifically: “[a] new subjectivity is generated by textual and political practices, starting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, initially affecting only a few and slowly spreading as the center of a new mode of collective life – a culture and ‘civilization’ – of which state structures are the central armature” (5). It is this claim that I would like to explore. If the modern subject finds its origins in forces at work in the Middle Ages, who is this medieval/modern subject, what are the salient points of connection, and what are those forces, according to Haidu? How, in other words, are medieval and modern subjects in some sense the same sorts of subjects? What subjective positions are available to medieval subjects that are also available to modern ones? And what is the role of the literary?

Haidu identifies the formation of the state – “one very particular, historical form of governance” (2) – as a key component in the formation of the medieval-subject-turned-modern. According to Haidu, the state’s beginnings “are found in France and England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries” and constitute “the first foundations of what would become ‘modern’ states” (2). While the state’s beginnings are only one “somewhat more visible aspect of the transformation in European civilization” (2), its beginnings are, for Haidu, integrally tied to the formation of the medieval subject. The invention of the medieval subject and the medieval state are of a piece with one another: Haidu states that the “constitution of the subject is an integral part of medieval state-formation, with its increasing reliance on ideology and discipline” (4); he further states that “‘literary’ texts and historical practices from the Middle Ages participate in the cultural invention of the subject as part of the political invention of the state” (2). The newly emerging state thus both depends upon and produces a certain kind of subject and literature’s role in the production of this subject is integral as well: “Above all, ...practices modernity categorizes as ‘literature’ – a modern institution with no medieval equivalent – do the ideological work of their polity in exploring and constituting subjectivity by providing performative models of human comportment” (5).

The medieval state, subject, and literature surface early on in Haidu’s account as densely intertwined, in a classic “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” narrative. Haidu’s explanation of the subject as an entity constituted in two different phases helps somewhat to clarify the root of these connections. Haidu speaks to two phases of the subject, passive and active: “In the passive phase, [the subject] is the

object of manipulations of its parents, its own unconscious, and a world of representations that gather ideological value” (3). The second, active phase “recognizes the efficacy of the unconscious, but encounters the demand of social action as the world springs the necessity of making choices – often binary and framed by external conjunctures over which the subject has no immediate control – on the individual. This is the necessity of narrative...” (3). The subject becomes the place where contradictory demands necessitate difficult choices:

In historical societies, ideologies and disciplines are multiple: the individual is a site of multiple traversals, constituted in the disruption, breaking, and reknitting of multiple semiotic strands, his or her subject position(s) targeted by multiple interpellations. In that manifold, interferences and contradictions necessarily occur. Individual encodings are interrupted, requiring choices among the multiple interpellations (3-4).

Haidu quotes philosopher Alain Badiou’s definition of the subject in order to emphasize the staccato rhythm of this understanding of subject-formation: “A subject is that term which, submitted to the rule which determines a place, punctuates it with the interruption of its effect” (4). Haidu offers this gloss on Badiou’s definition: “It is in that interruption, in that disjunctive moment, when interpellation fails, and the subject is forced into excess over its cause, that subjectivity is attained and that text is formed, in the burdensome, enforced freedom of making choices” (4).

The subject, in other words, is (in) the text; it is the excess of its cause, wholly subjected, “site of multiple traversals,” but part (unwilling?) detractor, “forced into excess over its cause.” The subject becomes a “narrative, historical agent” (4) to the extent that he or she is subjected to a certain set of (ideological) choices and constraints, which Haidu situates at both conscious and unconscious levels, *and then*



*acts*. Action and narrative are wedded here – “subjectivity is attained and... text is formed” – but is all subjective action equivalent to narrative? Is inaction narrative too? And what does the action/narrative equivalence mean about the possibility of any sort of textual specificity? Is there any? In other words, what is the difference between (subjective) action/narrative *in* narrative and (subjective) action/narrative outside of a text? Or, what is the difference between subjectivity in narrative and subjectivity outside of a text? Is there one for Haidu?

Ultimately, it seems that the frame for Haidu’s subject is rigorously textual: subjectivity for Haidu is an “enforced freedom,” a project and a construction: it is “constructed by the choices the subject makes as narrative, historical agent” (4). Subjectivity is not pre-given, and its attendant fragility is, according to Haidu, of specific interest to medieval texts: “...the contemporary discovery of subjectivity’s fragile nature makes of it more a goal, a hope to be attained, than the stable ontological assumption of political life: subjectivity is always under construction. It is constructed by the choices the subject makes as narrative, historical agent. It is this latter, active phase of the subject that medieval texts explore” (4). In other words, medieval texts depict not a stable subject but a paradoxically active *and* fragile subject which constructs itself out of the choices available. Again, “This is the necessity of narrative...” Thus it seems that we can conclude that, for Haidu, subjectivity *is* narrative, necessarily; medieval literature is particularly interested in the subject’s narrative construction; and medieval narratives of subjective construction play an important role in the production of both the subjects *of* the state and the state itself.

Haidu maps out this fragile, active, literary subject through expansive readings of epic, hagiography, romance, and lyric and a multitude of historical phenomena ranging from the Oaths of Strasbourg to the King's Peace, from the rise and fall of the principality to medieval forms of surveillance. Amidst the many analyses proffered by this daunting study, I wish to consider more closely two moments: in the first of these, Haidu briefly engages with some of the implications of the fact that "literature" is "a modern institution with no medieval equivalent" (5). In the second, he recounts Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*'s lesson for modernity, a lesson of subjectification which, requiring literature, is, to Haidu's mind, "recognize[d] with difficulty" (114) by psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

The first point is, of course, generic: Haidu reminds readers that the "generic distinction between 'history' and 'the novel' is modern" (97):

The twelfth century was sophisticated enough to know the difference between veracity and the lie, between a recital of events that had taken place and simulacral representations that had not... They were sophisticated enough to grasp that the simple binarism 'truth-or-lie' hid the more subtle category of 'fiction'... '*roman*' refers both to 'true' histories and to texts whose fictionality was patent... (97).

Lacking generic distinctions between "history" and "fiction" does not mean that the Middle Ages is ignorant of the distinction between "truth" and "lie," but it does suggest that, at the textual level, the aforementioned categories – truth, lie, history, fiction – are neither neatly delineated nor entirely discrete. As Haidu suggests, the Middle Ages was "sophisticated enough to grasp that the simple binarism 'truth-or-lie' hid the more subtle category of 'fiction.'" While Haidu indicates that the fictionality

of *some* texts was “patent,” he problematizes the notion that contemporary literary categorization would make the same sort of sense in medieval Europe.

Ultimately, the subject with whom Haidu is concerned is not precisely the same subject of interest to this project. Haidu directly addresses what he regards as the distinction between his understanding of subjectivity and a Lacanian one in the second point referenced above. Reading Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, Haidu considers the implications of the fact that “[o]ur perception of Yvain is almost entirely external” (114), and this in a narrative that Haidu reads as structured entirely around the question of subjectivity (105). Indeed, according to Haidu, “The subject is the topic of all Chrétien de Troyes’s work” (100). Yet there is barely an “I” in *Yvain*, and the “text rarely enters into [Yvain’s] putative interiority” (114):

in this narrative, all about the destruction and reconstruction of subjectivity, what is not represented are the psychic workings of an individual ego... At precisely the points where a modern rhetoric of fiction would anticipate entry into the internal world of subjectivity, a wall of conventionalism faces the reader. For the latter, the narration seems to betray the narrative. It aims at subjectification, but recounts only action (114).

This, however, is precisely *Yvain*’s lesson for modernity: a field has been forgotten: “Subjectivity is not only an ocean of inchoate feelings, from terror to orgasmic pleasures of the sublime, awash in an individual interior. Nor is it only symptomatic enunciations of an unconscious substituted for subjectivity. Subjectivity is a potentiality for action inscribed by ideologies, the multiple systems of value abroad in the culture” (114). Haidu clarifies that “[e]motions and the unconscious are not irrelevant to such potentials for action, but they do not exhaust the field of subjectivity” (114). Haidu criticizes the idea that subjectivity would be either a vast

oceanic interiority or locatable only in the rupturing enunciations of the unconscious, insisting that *Yvain* tells a tale of a subject, without, however, offering much by way of either of the above.

Haidu's concern seems to rest not only in remarking how medieval texts inscribe their own brand of subjectivity, but in finding therein the traces of an understanding of subjectivity which makes space for – indeed, depends upon – social action, a space occluded, to his mind, by psychoanalytic and deconstructionist theories of the subject: “Psychoanalysis and deconstruction recognize with difficulty the ultimate necessity that besets the individual, of eventually taking action within a social and political sphere, action that has further constitutive effects of subjectification: the relations of subject and society are marked by loops, dialectic as well as repetitions, each constitutive of the other” (114-115). These constitutive loops find expression not in “descriptions of interiority or structures of the unconscious” (115) but in subjects' actions, such as Yvain's actions, produced by, within, and as narrative. Here we find the answer to the question posed earlier about the equivalence of action and narrative: “In a textuality focused on the narration of action, the hero does not figure a radical individualism. The individual is a necessity of narrative, not necessarily an ontological existent” (115). (Individual?, narrative?) action trumps the individual, and the subject is born.

### **III. Lacan's Medieval Subject?**

Lacan, too, finds a salient correlation between medieval subjectivities and modern ones. Famously, Lacan turns to lyric poetry to explore the concept of sublimation,

seeking, in that “distant affair,” “something that has happened to us, relative to the Thing” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 112-113). He claims that

courtly love was, in brief, a poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn't have had any real concrete equivalent. Nevertheless, these ideals, first among which is that of the Lady, are to be found in subsequent periods, down to our own. The influence of these ideals is a highly concrete one in the organization of contemporary man's sentimental attachments, and it continues its forward march (148).

While Lacan thus gives support to the notion of a certain connection between medieval and modern subjectivities, it does seem that the subject as it is defined by Lacan is not quite equivalent to the subject Haidu finds in medieval texts. Haidu ultimately defines subjectivity as “that reserved and necessary possibility of making choices among contradictory constitutive ideological codes, plus the psychic space to accommodate that function: a possibility of encompassing the terms of a contradiction, a stretch of dubiety and hesitation” (328). For Lacan, on the other hand, the subject (in one of its formulations) is,

something that comes to us from the structural necessities, something humble, born at the level of the lowest encounters and of all the talking crowd that precedes us, at the level of the structure of the signifier, of the languages spoken in a stuttering, stumbling way, but which cannot elude constraints whose echoes, model, style can be found, curiously enough, in contemporary mathematics (*Four Fundamental* 47).

There are resonances between Haidu and Lacan's definitions of subjectivity: both definitions speak to something outside, “contradictory constitutive ideological codes” and “all the talking crowd that precedes us... languages spoken in a stuttering, stumbling way”; both describe the subject as a space subject to constraints, as “that reserved and necessary possibility of making choices,” that “which cannot elude

constraints” (constraints which Lacan, however, affiliates with contemporary mathematics and Haidu with discipline and ideology).

While both thinkers point to the impact of external factors, Lacan also, however, insists upon certain differences between the social actor, or the ego, and the subject: “Naïve mouth,” Lacan notes, addressing an imagined objector, but also, in a sense, the subject as such: “The subject goes far beyond what is experienced ‘subjectively’ by the individual; he goes exactly as far as the truth he is able to attain” (“Function and Field” 219). The question, of course, is what is encapsulated in this cryptic description of a truth to be attained. What does it mean to say that the “subject goes far beyond what is experienced ‘subjectively’ by the individual”? And what might that mean with respect to Haidu’s suggestion that we think the subject as one of action/narration?

Lacan specifies that the subject is “not the soul, either mortal or immortal, which has been with us for so long, nor some shade, some double, some phantom, nor even some supposed psycho-spherical shell, the locus of the defences and other such simplified notions” (*Four Fundamental* 47). Rather, the subject is that which is at home in the dream (44). Lacan quotes Freud: “*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*. This does not mean, as some execrable translation would have it, *Le moi doit déloger le ça* (the ego must dislodge the id)... Where it was, the *Ich*... the subject, must come into existence” (44-45). The ego (*Ich, moi*) is not privileged in Lacan’s reading of the Freudian quote; instead, the subject of the unconscious is – the subject which is, again, at home in the dream. As psychoanalytic theorist Tracy McNulty explains, Freud’s formula

had been interpreted by the proponents of ego psychology to mean that the ego must come to dominate or subsume the id... But Lacan understands his comment very differently. Instead of implying the colonization of the id by the ego, it points to the necessary *expropriation* of the ego by the id: there where 'it' was – the *es* or id – the subject shall come into being *as a subject of the unconscious*, and not as a self-possessed ego (*The Hostess* xxiii).

This is not to say that, after analysis, ids shall roam free, pure death drives which/who have cheerfully subdued their accompanying, spent and humiliated egos; but it does suggest that Lacan might protest to Haidu that not *all* of the actions taken by the ego, operating within the social, reference the subject, or reference it in the same way: as McNulty points out, the ego tends to repress the subject of the unconscious; the subject of the unconscious “appears only as a rupture in the world...” (“Demanding the Impossible” 1). What “goes far beyond what is experienced subjectively by the ‘individual’” thus would seem to entail an incompleteness of knowledge of which Haidu’s subject of action/narration remains at least partly innocent.

Still, for both Haidu and Lacan, the subject is “something humble,” “a stretch of dubiety and hesitation.” Ultimately it is the uncertainty of the subject that is of principal interest to me in reading these medieval transgender narratives. The transgender subject’s uncertainty recalls the difference outlined above between the subject and the ego, for certainty is the pursuit of the ego, not a project of interest or value to the subject. Psychoanalytic theorist Ellie Ragland-Sullivan recalls Lacan’s play on words – *maître/m’être* (master, to be me) – in defining the ego (the *moi*, the me) as “a fiction complicitous with its own deceptions” (“The Sexual Masquerade” 71). According to Ragland-Sullivan, “In this sense the ego might be called the site of

ideology in the sense that ideology is narcissistic, a master (*m'être*) discourse whose goal is certainty and closure: 'to be me'" (71).

#### **IV. The Subject of Uncertainty**

We come, then, to the crux of this project: uncertainty. If certainty is the hallmark of the ego, then (the ideal of) *gender* certainty may be the most culturally trenchant of the trademark gestures of the contemporary, Western ego. This, it seems to me, would be generically true: gender certainty is the prerogative of all sorts of people, whether or not the gender of which they feel certain is the one that was assigned to them at birth. This is one of the primary reasons why I find the subject/ego distinction elaborated in psychoanalysis – and thus the vocabulary of “subjectivity” as such – both so intriguing and so useful. The subject/ego distinction allows us to think not only gender identity as an iterative performance more or less destined to fail at times, not only the ego as such as an object of fantasy aiming at coherence, but the *subject* as a localization of desire whose discontinuities index a loss about which we can only hypothesize. In Chapter One, I define “transsexuality” as the experience of identifying with a gender that is not consonant with the gender assigned at birth. I further suggest that, inasmuch as an ostensibly “transsexual” person identifies with one gender or another with a degree of certainty, he/she/ze is psychically no different than ostensibly “nontranssexual” persons who also identify as one gender or another with a degree of certainty. The transgender of interest to this project, by contrast, is that which is marked by an irreducible uncertainty: on the one hand, such a transgender is common to subjects as such, constituting the scene of undecideability described by Freud as our



aboriginal bisexuality. But, in the stories explored here, that scene of undecideability is staged, expressed, interrogated, and poeticized.

Voices in queer theory in both medieval and modern literary studies have expressed reservations about, not only – as historically – psychoanalysis, but the vocabulary of “the subject” as such. Michael Snediker, for example, explains, in the introduction to *Queer Optimism*, his preference for “persons” over “subjects”:

My theoretical preference for persons over subjects extends from questions of how personhood – as formulated within the poems on which subsequent chapters’ arguments depend – might be characterized, removed from the columbarium of subjectivity... Far from invoking persons freed from discursive necessity, *Queer Optimism* scrutinizes the conundra of discursivity at its most local – rather than importing a set of subjectival stipulations extrinsic from the discursive system of a given poem (3).

Similarly, Raskolnikov notes, in the introduction to *Body Against Soul: Gender and Sowlehele in Middle English Allegory*, that her “approach offers a return to the question of the self with a new twist,” resisting the urge to “present[ ] a prehistory of that vague entity ‘the subject’ ...” (8).

I agree that “the subject” has often been a fabulously “vague entity,” and these vagaries beg certain questions. For example, has the subject, for some, been the individual all along? When and for whom has it been something other? When has it been the subject of the unconscious, and what would that really be? While I agree with Raskolnikov’s characterization of the subject as a vague entity, I don’t hope to correct “the subject’s” conventional vagueness – this is not what Raskolnikov is asking for, of course, but how would one, after all, define the subject or subjectivity once and for all? McNulty nicely captures that quality of elusiveness characteristic of subjectivity, suggesting that it could in fact be read as intrinsic to the subject itself:

“The subject is itself an ‘impossible object’ in this sense, a pure hypothesis that cannot be observed scientifically or explained as a product of culture” (“Demanding the Impossible” 4).

The subject may indeed be, in a certain sense, a vague entity, but I part company with Snediker’s characterization of subjectivity as “columbarium” (although I appreciate his uniquely poetic use of language throughout *Queer Optimism*); with this word, Snediker seems to wish to vanquish the subject to a site of theoretic irrelevance, to strip it of its suspect and elitist veneration. While I do not hope to evacuate the provocative aspects of the subject’s vagaries, I do hope to articulate the genealogy I have in mind in my own use of the term, and the vague but venerated subject is not, I hope, the one that I will be dealing with here.

In some sense, these tales respond to Snediker’s appeal that we consider “what is coherent” in the self: “It seems crucial, in affirming what is incoherent in oneself, to understand likewise what is coherent and, furthermore, crucial to have a vocabulary as adequate to coherence as to coherence’s disruption. Why take coherence for granted?” (*Queer Optimism* 25). Snediker points to the lack of attention to coherence in and of itself, suggesting that it – like optimism and, later, like love – are glossed over and reduced, encountered as theoretic anathema and therefore left without vocabulary or specificity. These tales are preoccupied, however, not precisely with what *is* coherent but with what is *supposed to be* coherent, what aims at coherence: Silence’s heart is divided, and he suffers for it; Esmerade is quartered off from the other monks for fear of the disruptions that his incoherent medley of possible identifications might cause. For psychoanalysis, the vocabulary of coherence is the ego’s aim and its terrain.

These tales map the distance between the wistfulness of the ego, here represented as gender identity, and the buzz of contrariety, the subject's disruption, indeed, the subject's complaint. But these tales are, I think, equally concerned with *both* pieces of the puzzle, with both the ego's drive to coherence and certainty (which of these social identities might explain me as a subject?) and the subject's momentum in the opposite direction. Snediker wishes for "the cultivation of a vocabulary of coherence that more precisely does justice to the ways in which coherence isn't expansively, unilaterally destructive, reductive, or ideological" (26). Lacan might respond, "*Wo es war, soll Ich warden,*" calling for the displacement of the ego by the subject of the unconscious, the latter of whose hallmark is, again, indeed, disruption, a disruption embraced by certain psychoanalytic-leaning strands of queer theory which Snediker describes at one point, unfavorably, as "[t]he pain-machine" (122). But as Ragland-Sullivan reminds us, "Lacan taught that giving up on harmony, on the ideal, opens us up paradoxically, to greater freedoms" (68). In other words: if the not-all or transgender subject formulates the question of the failure of relationality (the fundamental question of subjectivity) in terms of a question about the ego's coherence (specifically, that hegemonic coherence known as gender identity), then in a way, the not-all/transgender subject frees one bird with two stones. For this displacement of coherence is not (only) a "pain-machine," but "opens us up paradoxically, to greater freedoms."

I would like to suggest that these medieval literary accounts of transgender subjectivity answer to unresolved issues in Lacanian psychoanalysis. If, as I argue in Chapter One, transgender subjectivity can be read as one of the most fundamental expressions of human subjectivity as such, then why, when it is accompanied by

elements of gender non-normativity, is it met in the psychoanalytic community with silence and/or transphobia? Silence and transphobia have profoundly limited psychoanalysis's engagement with transgender. Fortunately, literature has spoken where psychoanalysis hasn't. The texts I consider address some of the questions that psychoanalysis, so far, has not, for while these texts share with Lacanian psychoanalysis a preoccupation with subjectivity, the medieval texts are far more willing to delve into how and why the problem of subjectivity gets elaborated in terms of a radical question about gender identity. Ostensibly, this is the core of Lacanian psychoanalysis as well: both Freud and Lacan elevated the hysteric's question to the status of an axiom. Yet neither Lacan nor his followers – with the important exception of Gherovici – have confronted the existence of transgender phenomena as a manifestation of this axiom. They have not, in other words, regarded transgender phenomena as having anything to do with the (hysterical) question of subjectivity itself. They have not explored *why* one of the fundamental questions of subjectivity itself takes the form of a question about gender identity.

## **V. Conclusion**

The texts I have chosen to consider in my project feature what I read as transgender characters. In Chapter Two, “Eunuch, Not-Eunuch: Failures of Correspondence in the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*,” I turn to the anonymous thirteenth century saint's life the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*, which has been most famously analyzed by Simon Gaunt. One of the two extant Old French saints' lives featuring a cross-dressing saint, the anonymous text has received, as Gaunt points out, very little critical attention;

however, cross-dressing saints were a popular motif in the European Middle Ages. In the tale, Euphrosine runs away to escape an unwanted betrothal. She presents as a eunuch to gain entry into a monastery and is known by the gender-neutral name Esmerade (Emerald). Esmerade encounters his father Panutius again when, devastated by the disappearance of his daughter, Panutius turns to the monastery for spiritual guidance. Panutius fails to recognize the monk before him as the daughter he lost, and the two strike up a friendship that lasts 38 years, until Esmerade reveals with his dying breath that he is, in fact, Panutius's daughter. Dating from around the year 1200, *Euphrosine* emerges at a time when the dominant discourses on kinship are in a state of conflict and negotiation. I suggest that the *vita* rejects available models of understanding of human exchange, but not relationality as such. Indeed, Esmerade's abandonments allow him to open onto a tender relationship with his father, one founded on the unstable ground of misrecognition, "sweet words," and unfulfilled promises. I argue that both Esmerade's failures to correspond to pre-determined gender categories and his "un-credible" words provide a vantage point from which to approach the relational possibilities borne of failure, and that these in fact constitute the basis on which he is able to forge a tender tie with the father who does not recognize him.

In Chapter Three, "Beyond 'A Pure Passing': Transgender Voices in Joy Ladin's 'The Voice' and Heldris of Cornualle's *Roman de Silence*," I turn to Heldris Cornuälle's thirteenth century romance the *Roman de Silence* and Joy Ladin's contemporary essay "The Voice." Silence, born a "girl," is raised as "boy" for reasons of inheritance. At a certain age, he is made aware by his father that he is not exactly

like the other boys, and he begins to be visited by Nature and Nurture, allegorical figures who vie for his body and gender identity. I look in particular at Helderis's portrayal of the "grant tencon" (great tension) between Nature and Nurture, arguing that the romance suggests that neither is sufficient to account for Silence's (sexed) being and that that very insufficiency can be read as the condition of Silence's embrace of voice. I compare this medieval account of a "transgender voice" to that described by Ladin in her contemporary tale of vocal transition, arguing that, while Ladin is able to access a voice that would represent an "authentic self," Silence's remains inauthentic, deferred, and at a distance.

In Chapter Four, "Signifying Without Limit: The *Isle des Hermaphrodites*," I turn to Thomas Artus's seventeenth century travel narrative the *Isle des Hermaphrodites*. Generally read as a satire of the court of Henri III (1574-1589), a king accused of bisexuality, sodomy, effeminacy, and hermaphroditism, the novel tells the story of a shipwrecked Frenchman who, wandering around an island of hermaphrodites, marvels at their artistic wonders, laws, and customs. I suggest the novel depicts a different take on transgender subjectivity from that analyzed in the rest of the project. The hermaphrodites approach the symbolic as a site of ruse to be exposed for its laughable shortcomings: they expose all social structures in their lack of foundation, and their laws prescribing infinite invention and linguistic play represent a caricatured form of those gender studies' perspectives according to which language has no limit.

In Chapter Five, "Beyond the Grammar of the Norm: Transgender Subjectivity and the Limit(s) of Sexual Difference," I consider a set of gender studies and

psychoanalytic texts where the limit of sexual difference is at issue. For some, the limit of sexual difference is identified and/or critiqued as normative and disciplinary: we are constrained to become only certain kinds of “sexed” bodies. For others, that limit is “natural”: bodies are given only as “male” and “female,” and this limit is unimpeachable. For Lacan, however, the limit of sexual difference is logical – but what kind of limit is this? Why is this impasse what sexual difference “is”? And how does transgender subjectivity relate to it? In dialogue with texts by theorists like Judith Butler, Joan Copjec, Geneviève Morel, and Gayle Salamon, I find that the various forms the limit of sexual difference may take – normative, organic, or logical – sometimes slip, and that this slippage can be found particularly in those moments when authors are dealing, whether implicitly or explicitly, with transgender subjectivity and transgender and gender non-normative embodiment. I suggest that this slippage is problematic in those psychoanalytic texts where the logical limit of sexual difference lapses into a normative or organic one. It is here that I suggest that sexual difference might be apprehended as a language for thinking about how subjects position themselves with respect *to* the limit, and more specifically, their own limits, and that transgender subjectivity’s experience of this limit may be illuminating, inasmuch as it situates that limit as a moving target.

In the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*, the young heiress Euphrosine runs away to live as Esmerade the monk. In the *Roman de Silence*, Silence, born a “girl,” is raised as “boy” for reasons of inheritance. In each of these tales, gender appears in the mode of a questioning, and often this questioning shades quickly in to other dilemmas and uncertainties, such that the questioning of gender conjugates poetically diverse

semantic fields and multiple epistemological puzzles – “U fut ceste trovee?” (*Euphrosine* 205) (in Simon Gaunt’s lovely translation, “Where was this creature found?” [“Straight Minds” 448], ask the astonished monks when Esmerade appears in the monastery, suggesting that Esmerade’s humanity as such is open to debate. (Importantly, the monks are responding with wild desire to this potentially inhuman creature.) Humanity is similarly in question with the “hermaphrodites” of Artus’s travel narrative: as the narrator remarks in describing his first encounter with an elite hermaphrodite, “Je n’avois encore veu ce *que* c’estoit qui estoit dans ce lict” ‘I had not yet seen what *it* was that was in this bed’ (*Isle* 60, my translation, emphasis added). For Silence, being as such is at times configured as a perilous category: “Et cuers s’est une creäture / Mervelles d’estränge nature... ses pensers le tormentoit / Et il le sentoit et soffroit. / ... Silence ot le cuer diviers” ‘And the human heart is a creature / that has a strange and peculiar nature... his thoughts tormented him, / and he felt this and suffered from it... Silence’s heart was divided against itself’ (Sarah Roche-Mahdi, *Silence* 124-127).

From the telling homonyms of the *Roman de Silence* to the paradoxical prophecies of the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*, each text explores how language inscribes (itself on) trans characters and how these characters may creatively sustain themselves in relation to these inscriptions. Thus, these stories foreground the significance of language, and its limits, to “sexed” being. “[L]anguage’s transformative promise” (Victoria Pitts-Taylor, “Editors’ Note” 9) is also one of the categories called upon by those engaged today with questions of “trans-” “across disciplinary borders, across spatial and temporal planes, moving as well among public and private, academic and



personal, mind and body, and troubling those distinctions” (Pitts-Taylor 9).<sup>13</sup> For example, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, in speaking to the “critical deployment of ‘trans-’ operations and movements” (13), and the “new social ontologies” (14) that may be occasioned “by putting ‘trans-’ in the place that Foucault assigned to sexuality” (14), ultimately describe the “movement between territorializing and deterritorializing ‘trans-’ and its suffixes” (14) as an “*essentially poetic* practice through which radically new possibilities for being in the world can start to emerge” (14, emphasis added). Their call for trans-poesis looks forward, but, as Raskolnikov points out, some of this desire that we now sometimes call trans is also very old: people have “been concealing, queering and changing their sex since time immemorial” (“Transgendering Pride” 157) and “[t]he term ‘transgendered,’ like the term ‘queer,’ is a term conceived broadly enough to potentially include medieval people” (158). Putting Raskolnikov in dialogue with Stryker, Currah, and Moore, then, yields something like this: medieval narratives of transgender may participate, and have already participated, in the “essentially poetic practice through which radically new possibilities for being in the world can start to emerge.” These medieval narratives are our future anterior: they will have been trans poetics.

My hunch, though, is that the analogy between contemporary and medieval accounts of transgender is only partly about legacies of “concealing, queering and changing... sex”: it has just as much, if not more, to do with the category of

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that Pitts-Taylor makes reference to the psychoanalytic notion of “transference” in the Editors’ Note opening on to *WSQ*’s special issue on “trans-” while explaining the “reading experience” of the issue: “We called this reading experience a trans-action, to emphasize the extent to which this issue is a call to action, yet the model of a trans-action perhaps suggests too much finality, as if you read the articles and then you’re done. Perhaps the trans- we need is ‘transference,’ the name for the mistake that makes psychoanalysis possible, but in addition the name for a relationship that is also a gift, as in transferring something among us: the readers, writers, and editors” (9-10).

subjectivity as such. This shift is important, for it spells out part of the difference between what is at stake in a psychoanalytic account of sexual difference and, indeed, what is at stake for the philosophical vocabularies on which Stryker, Currah, and Moore draw in this citation. When they describe the “movement between territorializing and deterritorializing ‘trans-’ and its suffixes” (14), they are calling on the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Deleuze and Guattari soundly reject the notion of castration:

We know very well where lack – and its subjective correlative – come from. Lack (*manque*) is created, planned, and organized in and through social production... It is never primary; production is never organized on the basis of a pre-existing need or lack (*manque*). It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organization of an already existing organization of production. The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class (*Anti-Oedipus* 28).

Put most minimally, the difference between a psychoanalytic account of sexual difference and the philosophical vocabulary referenced above is one of limits. It is the narration of limits that I believe these extremely *old* transgender narratives offer as something *new* to contemporary critical theories of (trans)gender: these limits are not found along the contours of a sexual difference which would be reduced to a “genital difference”; they lie elsewhere and they take different forms depending on the narrative and the character in question: for example, for Silence, it emerges in the scene wherein the allegorical figure of Reason tells him that to live as a girl once again would be for him a form of death. For Esmerade, it emerges in his progressive physical deterioration upon being cut off from the other monks of the monastery. It even emerges for the hermaphrodites, who, in their pursuit of limitlessness,

nonetheless keep bumping into strange obstacles. While what I am grouping under the name “the limit” thus takes different forms in each of the texts I consider, some sort of limit is always present; in this last sense, these limits are intractable even as they are moving targets.

In her account of Lacan’s “not-all” subject position, Copjec approaches and then retreats from the assertion that “not-all” or “feminine” subjectivity – what, then, I am calling “transgender subjectivity” – would be in some sense the fundamental expression of human subjectivity. She writes,

We are not going to begin our reading, as is customary, on the left, but rather on the right, or female, side of the formulas. As opposed to the fairly common prejudice that psychoanalysis constructs the woman as secondary, as a mere alteration of the man, the primary term, these formulas suggest that there is a kind of priority to the right side. This reading of the formulas is consistent with the privilege given the mathematical antinomies by Kant, who not only deals with them first but also grants the mathematical synthesis a more immediate type of certitude than its dynamical counterpart. In Kant’s analysis, it is the dynamical antinomies (the ‘male side’ of the formulas, in our reading) that appear in many ways secondary, a kind of *resolution* to a more fundamental *irresolvability*, a total and complete impasse manifested by the mathematical conflict... (*Read My Desire* 217).

I will address the details of Copjec’s reading of Lacan’s formulas of sexual difference in Chapter Five, but for the moment, I would simply like to point to her identification of the “feminine” (as she writes, “female”<sup>14</sup>) subject position as having “a kind of priority,” such that the “masculine” position would constitute “a kind of *resolution* to a more fundamental *irresolvability*.” The emptiness and irresolvability faced by the not-all/transgender subject – the absence of any signifier that can account for such a subject’s, any subject’s, “being” – means that such a subject is (silently) called upon to

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<sup>14</sup> I will address what I regard as problematic in Copjec’s equation of “feminine” subject positions with “femaleness” in Chapter Five.

sustain him-, her-, or himself, as Copjec writes, “from the side of the void” (“The Fable of the Stork” 72). Those subjects Lacan describes as “masculine” would be, in Copjec’s terms, on “the side of the symbolic” (72); but those on the side of the void, anxious and creative, seek signifiers, too.

## CHAPTER 1

### Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference

#### **Introduction**

Perhaps it could be argued that gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis read each other askew; indeed, they read each other, and reach for each other, rather queerly. Provisionally defining gender studies as the study of the stakes of sexual identity, sexuality, and their multifarious disruptions, it is easy to see that Judith Butler, at least, one of the foremost thinkers in the field, has a certain profound investment in thinking through psychoanalytic claims about sex and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Her texts *Antigone's Claim* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, demonstrating a deconstructivist approach that takes seriously Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remark that "[t]he critique in deconstruction [. . .] is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything" (qtd. in *Bodies* 27), deal with almost nothing but the questions and vocabulary of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this way, she enters into a reputable history of thoughtful feminist and critical encounters with psychoanalysis, a list that includes the likes of Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray.

Conversely, contemporary Lacanians from time to time return gender studies' attention: Butler's texts in particular have stimulated acute readings from writers such as Joan Copjec and Tim Dean. Yet these responses are not precisely reciprocal;

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<sup>15</sup> As noted in the Introduction, I am using the term *gender studies* to outline rather loosely the study of sex, gender, and sexuality, such that it might comprise both "queer theory" and "transgender studies" as well. However, these fields are not ideologically assimilable.

Copjec and Dean deal primarily in psychoanalytic vocabulary without taking up the vocabulary proffered by Butler (such as “the lesbian phallus” or “the morphological imaginary”) and without sufficiently identifying or attending to the rationale, or the desire, motivating Butler’s concerns. Rather, much of their responses could be qualified as “corrective” readings of Butler’s readings of psychoanalysis.

Perhaps these correctives are warranted, given Butler’s own thoroughgoing critiques of psychoanalysis, but more could be gained, politically and psychically, if gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis integrated their energies and their political and intellectual concerns less fractiously but no less queerly, and with just as much desire. What do gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis have to offer one another? Is it possible to integrate the two domains, or do they, as Copjec charges<sup>16</sup> and as Butler herself seems to worry in *Antigone’s Claim*<sup>17</sup> represent fundamentally incompatible approaches?

Gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis share a set of common questions, including: What is a subject? What qualifies a human *as* human? What is the role of sex in the production of subjectivity? What is the role of sexuality in the production of subjectivity? What conceptual differences separate the terrains of “sex” and

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<sup>16</sup> Copjec: “I noted already that there was a crucial difference between hers [Butler’s] and the psychoanalytic position on sex. I want now to go further by exposing the ‘total incompatibility’ of the two positions” (209).

<sup>17</sup> Butler: “It is why, for instance, it would be difficult to find a fruitful engagement at the present time between the new Lacanian formalisms and the radical queer politics of, for example, Michael Warner and friends. The former insists on fundamental notions of sexual difference, which are based on rules that prohibit and regulate sexual exchange, rules we can break only to find ourselves ordered by them anew. The latter calls into question forms of sexual foundationalism that cast viable forms of queer sexual alliance as illegitimate or, indeed, impossible and unlivable. At its extreme, the radical sexual politics turns against psychoanalysis or, rather, its implicit normativity, and the neoformalists turn against queer studies as a ‘tragically’ utopian enterprise” (*Antigone’s Claim* 75)

“sexuality”? In spite of these shared concerns, sexual difference, what it is and what it means, often becomes a point of contention. This antagonism is perhaps most stringently encapsulated in Kate Bornstein’s response to Lacanian psychoanalyst Catherine Millot’s text on transsexuality, when the former writes, “Gender terrorists are not the leather daddies or back-seat Betties. Gender terrorists are not the married men, shivering in the dark as they slip on their wives’ panties. Gender terrorists are those who, like Ms. Millot, bang their heads against a gender system which is *real* and *natural*; and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. These are the real terrorists: the Gender Defenders” (236). The discourses of gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis collide to particularly spectacular effect around the questions of transsexuality and transgenderism. What remains to be seen is whether or not these spectacular effects might be channeled into some sort of understanding for a logic of sexual difference for present bodies as well as “the holographic and moving contours of *bodies to come, of bodies as they might come*” (Berger 64).

### **I. Something Has Been Lost**

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes that we as human animals are all bisexual (141) and that we are all perverts (160). The radical promise of Freud’s words on perversion has not gone unnoticed by gender theorists, who have rightly pointed to certain strident passages in Freud’s writings in order to object to a facile vilification of Freud as anti homosexuality.<sup>18</sup> Less attention seems to have been paid,

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis’s discussion of “Freud’s negative theory of sexuality” (xi), where “‘normal’ is conceived only by approximation, is more a projection than an actual state of being, while perversion and neurosis (the repressed form of perversion) are the actual forms and contents of

however, to Freud's words on bisexuality and the provocative connections between perversion and bisexuality (bisexuality as related to psychological hermaphroditism and/or physical hermaphroditism, as well as bisexuality as homo- plus heterosexuality).<sup>19</sup>

These terms, "bisexual" and "perversion," have specific connotations for Freud that do not map seamlessly onto contemporary, quotidian usages of the words. While it is in his discussion of "inversion" that Freud comes to offer his theory on bisexuality, the latter is not to be too quickly assimilated to matters of the sexual instinct. While some gender theorists would have us attentively separate out the terms "sex," "gender," and "sexuality," for Freud, bisexuality references sex, or, for him, the categories "man" and "woman," as well as sexuality: "It is popularly believed that a human being is either a man or a woman. Science, however, knows of cases in which the sexual characters are obscured, and in which it is consequently difficult to determine the sex" (7). Freud expands on this observation, that there exist individuals who could be referred to as physical hermaphrodites, to add, "The importance of these abnormalities lies in the unexpected fact that they facilitate our understanding of normal development. For it appears that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally. In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex" (7). Here again we see Freud at work disentangling only to re-link the notions of normal and abnormal, positing a relational configuration between the two that does not easily admit of any naturalization,

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sexuality" (xii). See also the Introduction to and Paul Robinson's chapter, "Freud and Homosexuality," in Dean and Lane, *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>19</sup> The excellent work of Gayle Salamon is a notable exception. See, in particular, "The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material."



reification, or prioritization of the so-called “normal.” As in so many cases for Freud, it is the “abnormal” that serves to provide insight into the “normal,” but, as de Lauretis writes, this “normal” is always a “projection” (*The Practice of Love* xii). The incidence of anatomical hermaphroditism leads Freud to suggest that “... an originally bisexual physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one, leaving behind only a few traces of the sex that has become atrophied” (7). In other words, Freud would have us believe that bisexuality, meaning both in terms of object choice and that of sexed being, is the condition of human subjectivity as such.

On the very first page of *Three Essays*, Freud provisionally defines the sexual object as “the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds,” after which he defines the sexual aim as “the act towards which the instinct tends” (2). He further defines “the normal sexual aim” (15) as “the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation” (15). This latter, when read without the context of Freud’s further elaboration on perversion, smacks of uninspiring normativity, and it is moments these like that rightly rankle some sensibilities. However, in the summary at the end of the text, Freud expands his definition of erogenous zones in a way that seems suggestive for an accompanying redefinition of the terrain of aims and object choices: “... sexual excitation in children springs from a multiplicity of forces. Satisfaction arises first and foremost from the appropriate sensory excitation of what we have described as erotogenic zones. It seems probable that any part of the skin and any sense-organ – probably, indeed, *any* organ – can function as an erotogenic zone...” (99).

What has happened in the meantime, between Freud's initial definition of sexual object as a person, and these closing words on what can be considered erogenous? While Freud would wish to carefully distinguish a sexual object from the (sexual/desiring) subject and her erogenous zones, such that auto-erotism would be defined as the subject taking *herself* as object, the "multiplicity of forces" of which Freud writes speaks to what is at play in polymorphous perversion, a state or form of desiring that admits of various deviations from the "normal" sexual objects and aim. Again evidencing a will to stem the flow of "commonsensical" chains of association between sexual instincts and objects, Freud concludes his section on inversion with the following cautioner:

It has been brought to our notice that we have been in the habit of regarding the connection between the sexual instinct and the sexual object as more intimate than it in fact is. Experience of the cases that are considered abnormal has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together – a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to form part and parcel of the instinct. We are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between instinct and object. It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions (14).

This caveat, that the sexual object and the sexual instinct are "merely soldered together" (14), would seem already to give the lie to a definitional relegation of the sexual object to persons (and perhaps by extension the relegation of "the normal sexual aim" to genital copulation).

Yet if the condition of human subjectivity as such is bisexuality, and if, as Lacan writes, Freud "posit[s] sexuality as essentially polymorphous, aberrant" (*Four* 176), then why in Lacan's reading of Freud are there only two sexual positions,

masculine and feminine? Where Butler might advocate gender play, where Derrida has been said to “dream [...] of a sexual relationship, albeit sexed otherwise: not one that is divided into two parts, played by two recognizable partners, but one that is inscribed in multiple ways” (Berger 60), Lacan replies implacably that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” (*Encore* 57) and that there is a feminine way to respond to that failure and a masculine way to respond to it. How do these qualifications, that there is no sexual relationship and that there are only two sexual positions, follow from the conditions of bisexuality and polymorphous perversion? And don’t these qualifications make psychoanalysis seem rather sexually impoverished with respect to other perspectives?

For Lacan, polymorphous perversion is the effect of castration, and, in the spirit of a perverse temporality, castration is equally the effect of polymorphous perversion. How is this so? In speaking of infantile sexuality, Freud provides the example of thumb sucking, explaining that in thumb sucking a child seeks a previously experienced pleasure that “is now remembered” (*Three Essays* 181). Later Freud qualifies, “The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it” (222). For Lacan, finding and refinding objects is not only the infantile, polymorphous precursor to an eventual castration by way of shame, disgust, morality (Freud 191), and the Oedipal drama but also, or rather, the sign that the subject has already been castrated.<sup>20</sup> For Lacan, as soon as there is an object, evidenced in the example of the infant’s turn to the thumb, there is castration. Something, in other words, has been lost. Lacan writes,

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<sup>20</sup> On the roles of shame, disgust, morality, and the Oedipal drama as forces of castration, Freud writes, “On this view, the forces destined to retain the sexual instinct upon certain lines are built up in childhood chiefly at the cost of perverse sexual impulses and with the assistance of education” (232).

[W]hat makes us distinguish this satisfaction from the mere auto-eroticism of the erogenous zone is the object that we confuse all too often with that upon which the drive closes—this object, which is in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied, Freud tells us, by any object, and whose agency we know only in the form of the lost object, the *petit a*. The *objet petit a* is not the origin of the oral drive. It is not introduced as the original food, it is introduced from the fact that no food will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by circumventing the eternally lacking object (*Four Fundamental* 179–80)

Lacan points to Freud’s specification that the object can be “any object” (180), commenting elsewhere, “Let us look at what he says – *As far as the object in the drive is concerned, let it be clear that it is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference*” (168). In other words, any object may be one toward which the drive might tend; what seems new here is the reason for such *pulsion*, as well as what is signified by that object around which the drive closes. Here the regression is not precisely, for example, from thumb to breast to milk, but rather from any object to object *a* as “the eternally lacking object.” Lacan tells us that object *a* is introduced from the fact that nothing, no thing—no food, no breast, no person—will ever satisfy the drive. Object *a* as “cause of desire” (*Encore* 92) is not the object that the subject seizes, nor is it the aim of desire, but rather, “It is either pre-subjective, or the foundation of an identification of the subject, or the foundation of an identification disavowed by the subject” (*Four* 186). It is, indeed, the foundation of a subject, but a contingent foundation: as Dean explains, “[T]his object counterintuitively (ungrammatically?) appears to precede the subject, to found the subject... Yet the apparent foundationalism of object *a* betokens a radically contingent foundation, since as Ellie Ragland points out, ‘[w]e humans are grounded in objects that are not themselves grounded’” (*Beyond* 194). In insisting that “any object” can stand in as a

representative for object *a* and that object *a* is only a further representative of “the eternally lacking object,” Lacan distances himself from a reading of Freud that would see a sexual developmental progression or “maturation” from the oral to the anal to the genital drives. Instead, Lacan emphasizes the essential groundlessness of object *a* and its voidlike role in the circuitous motion of the drive (*Four Fundamental* 181).

Lacan offers a variety of accounts of the “birth” or “origin” of these ungrounded objects *a*. The story of the lamella, as one such example, is Lacan’s playful revision of Plato’s myth in the *Symposium* as told by the narrative voice of Aristophanes. Replacing the missing parts as explained by Plato with the figure of the lamella, Lacan writes:

This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ – I can give you more details as to its zoological place – is the libido. It is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexual reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives the equivalents. The *objets a* are merely its representatives, its figures (*Four Fundamental* 197–98)

This is yet another narration of castration, this time a rather surreal mythologization where something called a “lamella” (which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “[a] thin plate, scale, layer, or film, esp. of bone or tissue; e.g. one of the thin scales or plates which compose some shells, one of the gills forming the hymenium of a mushroom, one of the erect scales appended to the corollas of some flowers”) transforms into an organ, and where that organ “is” the libido. In fact the lamella-as-libido provides the thin, hymenium contiguity for Lacan between what the subject loses via sexed reproduction and the order of the real, for “[i]t is precisely what is

subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction” (*Four Fundamental* 198). Lacan describes the libido as “essential” to “understanding the nature of the drive” (205), and his usage of a mythical organ to figure a real loss is strategic, for, as he writes, “This organ is unreal. Unreal is not imaginary. The unreal is defined by articulating itself on the real in a way that eludes us, and it is precisely this that requires that its representation should be mythical, as I have made it” (205). In *Encore*, meiosis will serve as the framework to tell the same story, again constituting “a thoroughly obvious subtraction” (66), whose “‘waste’ returns to haunt the libidinal subject in the form of object *a*” (Suzanne Barnard, “Tongues” 174).

As Suzanne Barnard tells it in her contribution to *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, the lost object figured in *Four Fundamental Concepts* is “an indestructible fragment of asexual, nonsymbolized libido” (“Tongues” 176), and it is lost to subjects not yet marked by the cut of sexual difference, therefore subjects who could be described as “asexual” or, better (bringing Freud back and emphasizing the sexual aspect of this so-called asexuality), “bisexual.” As Barnard explains, by the cut of sexual difference, subjects do not lose their other halves, but their “asexual ‘sameness’” (176). Perhaps we could describe this intermediary or rather semimythical state of ex-sistence prior to sexual difference as one of *a*-sexual asexuality, a scene imaginable, too, from a Freudian standpoint if we graft onto it his own account of the bisexual, polymorphously perverse subject. This is a scene that will resurface when we turn to Dean’s account of the queerer aspects of the psychoanalytic narration of sexuality.

Lacan's account of object *a* seems to pose no threat to any range of queer theories of sexuality insofar as it does not presuppose, for example, that a particular type of object *should* or in fact ever *could* satisfy the drive. Indeed, Lacan repeatedly mocks the institution of so-called genital primacy (*Ethics* 88). And yet none of this talk of objects, lamellas, and libido speaks directly to Lacan's assertion that there are two possible subject positions, masculine or feminine. Left only with a story of *a*-sexual asexuality, we might be halfway to a Lacanian narration of transgender ontology—not such a radical thought when we recall that Freud was the one who pointed out the constitutive bisexual perversion of the human unconscious. From whence, then, the feminine and masculine subject positions?

No matter where we locate the instantiation of loss in the subject (meiosis, birth, thumb sucking), it is clear that for psychoanalysis we are dealing with a desiring subject, a subject who lacks not simply some locatable object (e.g., a penis) but who lacks being as such. But, according to Lacan, there is not only one way to desire. This is another way of saying that there is not only one way to apprehend the lack in the Other. There are two sexual positions available to human subjects because, as Lacan asserts in *Encore* using the language of logic and mathematical formalization, subjects are positioned differently with respect to one term: the phallic function. There are two sexual positions insofar as every subject is either “all” or “not-all” under the phallic function.

Before falling too quickly into the abyss that can follow from the explication of the phallic function, a few preliminary words are in order on sexual difference as it relates to signification itself: Copjec notes that “[s]ex is the stumbling block of sense”

(204), citing Lacan's own comment that "[e]verything implied by the analytic engagement with human behavior indicates not that meaning reflects the sexual, but that it makes up for it" (qtd. on 204). Similarly, Renata Salecl writes in her introduction to *Sexuation* that sexual difference "is first and above all the name for a certain fundamental *deadlock* inherent in the symbolic order" (2). In fact, it is impossible to signify sex, and the phallus serves as "an empty signifier that stands for" that impossibility (Barnard, "Introduction" 10). Feminine and masculine subjects, then, relate to that failure, or *are* that failure, differently, or, as Lacan writes,

The universe is the place where, due to the fact of speaking, everything succeeds... in making the sexual relationship fail... The epithalamion, the duet..., the alternation, the love letter, they're not the sexual relationship. They revolve around the fact that there's no such thing as a sexual relationship. There is thus the male way of revolving around it, and then the other one, that I will not designate otherwise because it's what I'm in the process of elaborating this year – how that is elaborated in the female way. It is elaborated on the basis of the not-whole (*Encore* 56–57).

What is the status of this hotly contested "not-whole," and what does it illuminate about the phallic function? Veering into yet another scene of castration, the formulas of sexuation provide the "logical matrix" (Salecl 2) of the deadlock of sexual difference. As Lacan recounts, the formulas consist of the following: the right side of the formula, which reads  $\exists x \Phi x$  and  $\forall x \Phi x$ , figures the "feminine" side and can be translated to state that there is not one  $x$  that is not subject to the phallic function and that not every  $x$  is subject to the phallic function. The feminine subject finds "herself" "not-all" by way of negation insofar as "she" forms part of an open set, open and thereby infinite because it is not constituted by an exceptional figure. No shared trait – aside from the absence of any such shared trait – serves to define the set; no



constitutive outside functions close her set. Exceptionally lacking exception, though, and being only loosely linked by virtue of an absence offers/burdens the feminine subject (with) a particular perspective on the phallic function and thus on what grounds the masculine subject, which Barnard describes as “a view to the contingency of the signifier of the Other in its anchoring function... [S]he ‘knows’ that the signifier of phallic power merely lends a certain mysterious presence to the Law that veils its real impotence” (“Tongues” 178). One of the logical consequences of such a position, of “being in the symbolic ‘without exception’” (178), is that she has a different relation than the masculine subject, not only to the symbolic but also to the lack in the Other.

The “anchoring function” lacking to the feminine subject is located on the “masculine” side of Lacan’s formula: “On the left, the lower line –  $\forall \chi \Phi \chi$  – indicates that it is through the phallic function that man as whole acquires his inscription [. . .] with the proviso that this function is limited due to the existence of an  $x$  by which the function  $\Phi \chi$  is negated [. . .]:  $\exists \chi \Phi \chi$ ” (*Encore* 79). This exception also immediately takes on a truly exceptional status, from the standpoint of the masculine subject who is established by it, for the exception proffers the outside that closes “his” set and the limit that grounds “his” being; it thereby proffers a sort of support not afforded the feminine subject. One figure of this exception would be that of the mythical primal father, he who evades castration and thereby enjoys unlimited jouissance. In other words, the masculine subject is only “whole” or “all” as a result of the fact that he is permitted (permits himself?) the fantasy of one who escapes the very same set that grounds his being: “That is what is known as the father function – whereby we find,

via negation, the proposition [ . . . ], which grounds the operativity (*exercice*) of what makes up for the sexual relationship with castration, insofar as that relationship is in no way inscribable. The whole here is thus based on the exception posited as the end-point (*terme*), that is, on that which altogether negates  $\Phi\chi$ " (Lacan, *Encore* 79–80). As Lacan makes explicit here, castration/sexual difference is something that fundamentally, if incompletely, makes up for the absence of the sexual relationship. By this logic, the sexual positions borne of sexual difference figure as solutions, no doubt principally unsatisfying ones, for the loss of a sort of relation that was in fact never possible, a relation of One-ness or complementarity, or for the loss of that missing half that Plato tells us, somewhat cruelly, we once had. Importantly, though, nothing in this account specifies that the lost/nonexistent sexual relation was a heterosexual one. As Tracy McNulty has noted, "If the 'relation' that is lost is really the relation to the One, to unity or wholeness, then this would be true regardless of sex or sexual 'orientation'" (pers. comm.).

At least in this *Encore* explanation of the formulas of sexuation, Lacan's introduction to the feminine side reads quite differently from his introduction to the masculine side. Perhaps in the spirit of approximating form and content, the masculine description is considerably more formulaic. Immediately following his definition of the masculine side, his words concerning the feminine side posit a proviso that will prove fruitful for the turn to questions of transsexuality and transgenderism:

On the other side, you have the inscription of the woman portion of speaking beings. Any speaking being whatsoever, as is expressly formulated in Freudian theory, whether provided with the attributes of masculinity – attributes that

remain to be determined – or not, is allowed to inscribe itself in this part. If it inscribes itself there, it will not allow for any universality – it will be a not-whole, insofar as it has the choice of positing itself in  $\Phi x$  or of not being there (80).

Of course part of what is at stake in this particular citation is the status of the word *choice*. Is it significant that the matter of choice comes up in his description of the feminine side of the formula? And when Lacan states that any speaking subject has the choice to position itself or not in  $\Phi \chi$ , what is the relationship between the “choice” signaled here and any possibility of “choice” occasioned by Butlerian notions of gender play? Meanwhile, how do Butler’s and Lacan’s regimes of choice articulate with Susan Stryker’s observation that “performativity” and its promises do not always speak to “the self-understanding of many transgender people, who consider their sense of gendered self *not* to be subject to their instrumental will, not divestible, not a form of play” (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 10)? And what are the differences between the experiences of transsexualism and those of transgenderism when it comes to thinking about “choice?”

Already we can see further sets of challenges, knotting around questions of disciplinary allegiance, contestation, dissidence, identity politics, and ontology. These issues, too, will necessitate delicate unraveling as we continue to explore what Lacanian psychoanalysis and gender studies have to offer one another. Still, it is statements like Lacan’s, above, that offer hope, beyond the fears and objections of theorists like Butler and Copjec, that there *is* room for meeting ground between Lacanian psychoanalysis and gender studies, over and above – in fact, sometimes revolving precisely around – the divisions concerning (and that are perhaps inherent

in) sexual difference.

## II. '[P]sychoanalysis is a queer theory'

Dean further supports such optimism when he declares that “psychoanalysis *is* a queer theory” (*Beyond Sexuality* 215), meaning, in part, that Lacanian psychoanalysis has “antinormative potential” (217). One of the principal stakes of Dean’s project is “to think sexuality outside the terms of gender” (183). In accordance with many thinkers, he considers the debate between essentialism and constructivism, or what he calls foundationalism and rhetoricalism, a false alternative, and he takes a view on sexuality that he describes as “both immoderately antifoundationalist *and* antirhetoricalist” (178). In this way, he takes exception to Butler’s account of sexuality as outlined in *Bodies That Matter*, for, as he argues, Butler’s is a rhetoricalist approach. According to Dean, “rhetoricalist theories of sexuality effectively evacuate the category of desire from their accounts” by failing to take account of “what in rhetoric or discourse exceeds language” (178). Desire will prove essential to Dean’s own account of sexuality; in his project to deheterosexualize desire, Dean develops the notion of object *a* in order to theorize sexuality “outside the terms of gender *and* identity” (222). Dean demonstrates that a Lacanian theory of desire is “determined not by the gender of object-choice, but by the object *a* (*l’objet petit a*), which remains largely independent of gender” (216). By this move, Dean, via Lacan, goes further than Freud did in his account of humans’ constitutive bisexuality. Dean reminds readers of Freud’s claim that “we’ve all made a homosexual object-choice” (219). However, as Dean makes clear, such a pronouncement presupposes that an object be gendered in

the first place; by relying on humans' "bisexuality," Freud leaves intact the possibility that objects may be "somehow identifiable as masculine or feminine" (219). Object *a*, on the other hand, is not so easily assimilated to either hetero- or homosexual frames. Dean reminds readers of Lacan's "unthinkable list" of possible objects *a* – "lips..., the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids, even the hornshaped aperture of the ear..., the mamilla, faeces, the phallus (imaginary object), the urinary flow..., the phoneme, the gaze, the voice—the nothing" (Lacan qtd. in *Beyond Sexuality* 251–52).

Part of what is at stake in Dean's insistence on object *a* as the queerly "ordering" term for sexuality is his wish to relocate the scene of desire from one revolving around the phallus, which, according to Lacan, is the name for a certain lack borne of the desire of the Other ("Meaning" 83). Dean is sensitive to various feminist and queer critiques of Lacanian terminology, noting that suspicions about such terms as *lack* and *the phallus* are warranted, given, in part, the theological origins of lack and the psychoanalytic legacy of associating homosexuality with deficiency (*Beyond Sexuality* 248). Master terms such as *lack*, *loss*, *castration*, *death*, and *sexual difference* are not ideologically neutral, and Dean advises caution about how different terms may "imply invidious distinctions or otherwise embed normative ideologies of gender and sexuality" (248).

According to Dean, the limitation of situating the phallus at the center of a theoretical account of desire is not only that the phallus has such a problematic history but that it is a single term; object *a*, on the other hand, "implies multiple, heterogeneous possibilities for desire" (250). Dean wishes to figure desire within

“terms of multiplicity” (249) rather than principally according to an “ideology of lack” (247). He cites Lacan’s assertion that “[d]esire is a relation of being to lack” (qtd. in *Beyond Sexuality* 247) but emphasizes, too, that “the question of conceptualizing desire in terms of lack remains a stubborn problem” for a variety of queer- and feminist-minded projects (248). Dean identifies the latter resistance as having precisely to do with the way that the ideology of lack intersects with castration in psychoanalytic theory (248). In favor of such a scene, Dean turns instead to polymorphous perversion as a site of multiplicity, contending that theorizing desire from the point of excess instead of from the point of lack “makes desire essentially pluralistic, with all the inclusive implications of pluralism” (249).

For Dean, one of the advantages of theorizing desire from the starting point of polymorphous perversion arises from Freud’s understanding of polymorphous perversion as preceding normative – that is, genital – sexuality; in this way, perversion comes to represent a sort of “paradise lost” that “normal sexuality” will try, but never completely manage, to supplant (235). In rehearsing Freud’s decision to classify perversion in terms not of content but rather of “exclusiveness and fixation” (236), Dean will go so far as to suggest that “*the process of normalization itself is what’s pathological*, since normalization ‘fixes’ desire and generates the exclusiveness of sexual orientation [heterosexual or homosexual] as its symptom” (237).

Thus for Dean, polymorphous perversion figures as a model for desire to which he would have subjects return, both foundational and desirable insofar as it predates normalization. This move serves to shift focus from a scene of desire dependent on castration, “one that threatens to return us to the binary categories of

complementarity and homogeneity so inhospitable to non-normative sexualities” (*Beyond Sexuality* 249), to one dependent on a multiplicity of objects. While he knits polymorphous perversion and object *a* together with multiplicity, heterogeneity, and possibility, it seems important to acknowledge once again that primary perversion remains deeply imbricated with loss: it names the “stage” that inculcates desire via the production of objects, and, as we have seen, these objects are always already irremediably lost objects. Primary perversion also figures loss insofar as it is a lost stage, replaced as it is, to whatever extent that may be, by processes of normalization such as the formation of a sexual (orientation) identity. Perversion thus takes on a curious status in Dean’s thought, for from one perspective it constitutes a state of desire that is less lacking – the sheer multiplicity of objects available gestures in this direction. But insofar as these objects all remain lost objects, the opposite could be argued as well: via polymorphous perversion, the subject is more lacking by entertaining more (lost) objects. However, this change in the scenery of desire, from lacking phalluses to abundant objects, represents a provocative and productive development and needs to be read with respect to Dean’s own project to make the discourses of queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis more conversant: “[T]hough Lacan reads to me like a queer theorist *avant la lettre*, the institutional history of psychoanalysis, particularly in the United States, has forestalled any such alliance. As I’ve already suggested, a good part of this book’s intent lies in forging one— with the understanding that such an alliance might require both parties to renounce some of their most cherished shibboleths” (*Beyond Sexuality* 226).

While I am in accordance with Dean's assertion that both queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis may need "to renounce some of their most cherished shibboleths," I am interested in going in a slightly different direction than that outlined in *Beyond Sexuality*. While Dean is abundantly clear that he is not interested in gender, he also specifies that sexual difference (which, as we know by now, should not be collapsed into the category of gender) cannot be so summarily discounted: "Let me make clear that I'm not claiming that sexual difference is inconsequential to this account of sexuality, just that it is secondary. Desire emerges before sexual difference" (267). No doubt. Insofar as desire is the other side of lack/loss/castration, desire has been with the subject since the days of the lost lamella. However, what is not of interest to Dean, at least in this text, is Lacan's assertion that masculine and feminine subjects *relate differently* to object *a*. According to Lacan, it is the masculine subject that is principally occupied with object *a*. Queer as it is, could Dean's account of desire be lacking the feminine?

Lacan writes that "the object – from at least one pole of sexual identification, the male pole – the object... puts itself in the place of what cannot be glimpsed of the Other" (*Encore* 63). By contrast, for the feminine subject, "something other than object *a* is at stake in what comes to make up for the sexual relationship that does not exist" (63). Here again, we see Lacan specifying that via sexual difference, something tries to make up for the absence of the sexual relation. However, there is a fundamental asymmetry at play in the making up for lost/fantasized complementarity, for feminine and masculine subjects make up for the loss, in part, with recourse to different types of others.



On this point, Dean offers a compelling criticism of Lacan, suggesting that, in placing object *a* on the side of the feminine subject in his sexuation graph (found on page 78 of *Encore*), Lacan betrays a heterosexist impulse that is contested by his actual explanation of the “birth” and function of object *a*: “Although his axiom ‘there is no sexual relation’ counters the heterosexist assumption of complementarity between the sexes, Lacan’s explanations of this axiom are nevertheless invariably couched in terms of male and female failures to relate to each other, rather than in terms of relationality’s failure as such, regardless of gender” (“Homosexuality” 137). Identifying these explanations as instances of heterosexism at odds with Lacan’s own theory, Dean asserts again that Lacan’s theory of object *a* involves “a making other to myself of my own corporeal *jouissance*” such that “there is no way that desire can be, in the first instance, heterosexual” (137).<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the position of object *a* in Lacan’s depiction is a little deceiving. The sexuation graph seems to imply that feminine subjects lose all connection to object *a*, but we could read this instead to suggest that the feminine subject simply is not *as* invested in object *a* insofar as she might be overwhelmed with interrogating the phallic signifier and with a certain queer, inscrutable relation with the barred, lacking Other. To my knowledge, Lacan does not anywhere specify that feminine subjects

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<sup>21</sup> Dean goes on to explain, however, that “[a]ll desire entails the presence of the symbolic Other, but since this Other has no gender – there is no ‘Other sex’ – desire involves a relation to otherness independent of sexual difference” (“Homosexuality” 137). In this shift, from questions of Lacan’s theory of desire to questions of sexual difference, Dean attempts to clarify desire’s independence from the regime of “gender” but obscures the insight of the formulas of sexuation that “gender” and “sexual difference” are not one and the same thing. Too closely linking gender and sexual difference, Dean runs the risk of mandating “gendered” readings of Lacan, which could in turn result in a theory at times illogically heterosexist. At various moments in his narrations of the formulas, Lacan, too, can be read as too closely linking gender and sexual difference, which is why I have based my meditation primarily on the formulas.

lose all connection with object *a*; rather, he writes simply that “something other than object *a* is at stake in what comes to make up for (*suppléer*) the sexual relationship that does not exist” (*Encore* 63). Of importance here is that one consequence of sexual difference is that while the masculine subject becomes principally invested in object *a* – wherever he may locate it/them – as one compensation for the lack of the sexual relation, the feminine subject “is ‘twice’ related to the Other” (Barnard, “Tongues” 172). I take this to mean that the feminine subject is related both to object *a* (*autre*, or other) as that “scrap of the real” lost through sexed reproduction and to the Other conceived of as the lacking Other.

Dean’s reading of Lacan’s representation of sexual difference suggests there may be something to Butler’s critique that the Lacanian notion of sexual difference enjoins compulsory heterosexuality, if not in the formulas themselves, then at least in one way of reading the sexuation graph representation. In both *Bodies That Matter* and *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler performs readings of the subject’s entry into the symbolic via sexual differentiation, and two of her principal charges are that Lacan’s symbolic is normative and that the assumption of a sexed position enjoins compulsory heterosexuality. In *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler turns from matters of discourse and materiality to the scene of kinship in order to explore how psychoanalysis might both/either compel and/or inhibit the forging of new kinds of community ties, ties that Butler subsumes under the promising header “radical kinship.” Since this text provides a deeper reading of the Oedipal scene that she found so troublingly heterosexist in, particularly, chapter 3 of *Bodies That Matter*, I will concentrate my response on this somewhat more recent text.

Butler's investment in the possibility of imagining new forms of kinship ties has a strong affective and political attraction, which she wields to good end, for example, in her listing of the ways that "kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive" (*Antigone's Claim* 22). Butler cites the mobility of children who, because of migration, exile, refugee status, or situations of divorce or remarriage, "move from one family to another, move from a family to no family, move from no family to a family, or live, psychically, at the crossroads of the family, or in multiply layered family situations" (22). She points to the blending of straight and gay families, to gay nuclear families, and to straight or gay families where a child may have no mother or no father, or two mothers or two fathers, or half-brothers as friends (22–23), asking: "What has Oedipus engendered?... What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds?" (22–23). No doubt this is a time of potentially unprecedented familial mobility. Some would evaluate these realities as the sign of a crisis in "family values"; others would celebrate the more positive effects of the new types of ties and encounters. In this text, though, Butler is also taking aim at a particular strain of psychoanalysis that would seem unexpectedly to ally itself on some levels with defenders of the heterosexual nuclear family. Butler references such positions as she has encountered them, including psychoanalysts opposed to or at least worried about gay adoption as a possible source of psychosis for the adopted children, Jacques-Alain Miller's alleged opposition to male homosexual marriage on account of its likely infidelity, and others' suggestion that autism can be traceable to lesbian

parenting (70). Butler concludes, “These views commonly maintain that alternative kinship arrangements attempt to revise psychic structures in ways that lead to tragedy again, figured incessantly as the tragedy of and for the child.”

I, too, would object to the efficacy or relevance of such concerns, for many reasons. As one objection, these views appear to share the assumption that something like “gender” needs to accord to (or succeed in according to) a sexual position . In other words, these views, where they exist (meaning both in some Lacanians’ readings of sexual difference and in Butler’s reading of Lacan’s understanding of sexual difference), suggest once again that gender accords with unconscious sexuation. What, for example, is a “lesbian” according to those concerned about autism in children? What if an apparently “woman”-loving “heterosexual” “man” could be said to be unconsciously “feminine?” If “he” is in a relationship with a subject also describable as unconsciously “feminine,” is “he” a “lesbian?” Perhaps this divorcing of gender from unconscious sexuation sounds like another queer utopia and is for this reason, for some, unviable, but I think it is the logical consequence of Lacan’s claim that “[a]ny speaking being whatsoever, as is expressly formulated in Freudian theory, whether provided with the attributes of masculinity – attributes that remain to be determined – or not, is allowed to inscribe itself in [the woman portion of speaking beings]” (*Encore* 80). I would like to join Butler in imagining sexuation otherwise than as a scene of compulsory heterosexuality. However, I do not think that doing so requires locating a loophole in the Oedipal narrative, as Butler does in her interpretation of the Antigone story. For while Butler is quite right to lament and fear the compulsory heterosexuality that provides a potent backdrop to many societal

norms and ideals, no one knew better than Lacan that, as he put it, “[i]deals are society’s slaves” (qtd. in Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* 229).

In her argument, Butler seems to cast the Oedipal scene as the only available solution within psychoanalysis to the failure of the sexual relation, as in her observation that, for Lacan, the symbolic is “the realm of the Law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex” (*Antigone’s Claim* 18). True, all subjects enter the symbolic, but the Oedipal drama is a principally “masculine” (and indeed a principally “obsessional,” if not a principally heterosexual) solution to the failure of the sexual relation, one that hallucinates an object as prohibited. But as we have seen, there is not only one solution to the failure of the sexual relation: there are two! In this way, Butler is quite right to turn to Antigone as an alternative to the Oedipal solution. In Butler’s reading, Antigone helps us envisage new forms of kinship and, correspondingly, the “possibility of social transformation” (24). Butler indicates that Antigone’s own position in her family represents one of kinship incoherence (22), insofar as Antigone could be read to love her brother incestuously (6), and insofar as her father is also her brother. Butler notes that she is not advocating incest per se as a new, radical form of kinship (24); rather, in reflecting on the end of Sophocles’ play, she writes, “In this light, then, it is perhaps interesting to note that Antigone, who concludes the oedipal drama, fails to produce heterosexual closure for that drama, and that this may intimate the direction for a psychoanalytic theory that takes Antigone as its point of departure” (76). Perhaps Butler is exactly right on this count as well. Perhaps psychoanalysis *should* take Antigone as its point of departure. Through the figure of Antigone, Butler explores a non-Oedipal solution to the failure of the sexual

relation, one that in Lacan's reading entails a specifically feminine encounter with the signifier. However, she does so without avowing that this solution was available to subjects from the start, and it was not Oedipus who engendered it.

At some points, one might be led to wonder if Butler's configurations of the allegedly sedimentary symbolic might owe a bit more to Claude Lévi-Strauss than to Lacan's own reformulation, as for example when she writes,

The *Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in 1947, and within six years Lacan began to develop his more systematic account of the symbolic... On the one hand, we are told that the rule of prohibiting incest is universal, but Lévi-Strauss also acknowledges that it does not always "work." What he does not pursue, however, is the question, what forms does its nonworking take? Moreover, when the prohibition appears to work, does it have to sustain and manage a specter of its nonworking in order to proceed? (*Antigone's Claim* 16–17).

In contrast to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan is more explicit: the form the nonworking of the incest prohibition takes is femininity. Feminine figures testify precisely to the failure of the prohibition, for, as Copjec eloquently plots out, "Lacan answers that the woman is not-all because she lacks a limit, by which he means she is not susceptible to the threat of castration; the 'no' embodied by this threat does not function for her" (*Read My Desire* 226). While the "universal" incest prohibition does not "work" for the feminine subject, this does not necessarily mean that she has incestuous relations with or desires toward someone in her family (which may be composed as radically or as porously as permitted by the limits of our imaginations) – though she very well may, and I see no reason to shy away from Butler's suggestion that Antigone's desire for her brother Polynices is incestuous: "Is it perhaps the unlivable desire with which she lives, incest itself, that makes of her life a living death, that has no place within the

terms that confer intelligibility on life?” (*Antigone’s Claim* 23). Nonetheless, I would emphasize that incest as one possible disruptive form of radical kinship is not the only stake here. Rather, according to Lacan, *no* object – mother, father, brother, sister – is marked as prohibited for the feminine subject. Not only is incest not prohibited; *no one thing* is prohibited. Thus, for the masculine subject, the point is not that he need necessarily be a heterosexual, ostensibly “biological” boy barred access to his heterosexual, “biologically” female mother, but that he be a subject who has fallen under the blow of some prohibition and by consequence takes up a position as unconsciously masculine. And as McNulty has noted, “To believe that [the prohibited object is] the mother is a specific symptom, a particular way of resolving castration... by attributing it to the father and thereby making it ‘avoidable’ through obedience or submission to norms. [In other words,] it also reveals the ideology of norms as a way of avoiding castration” (pers. comm.).

On the other hand, for the feminine subject, the point is perhaps even more radical: regardless of her “gender,” the feminine subject is she to whom no prohibition is addressed. No universal can be made of or for her. The relief given the masculine subject, composing prohibitions as limits, does not transpire for the feminine subject. Instead, the nonworking of the prohibition is what ushers the feminine subject toward . . . maybe (who knows?) her brother/half-sister/stepmother/adoptive cousin/grandfather, and definitely toward a contingent encounter with the symbolic. With this in mind, I would suggest that Antigone’s claim on a future for kinship, or a future for relationality, as well as a future for psychoanalysis, has just as much, if not more, to offer by way of what she does as a feminine figure confronting a symbolic

that she is “totally, that is, limitlessly inscribed within” (Copjec, *Read My Desire* 227) as with what she does as a would-be incestuous figure that “represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement” (Butler, *Antigone’s Claim* 24).

Curiously, then, if we attempt a still more fragile point of contact between Lacanian psychoanalysis and gender studies, a contact on the question of femininity, we open onto the sort of radical clearing wished for and envisaged by gender theorists’ calls for a safer, more just world for queer and transgender subjectivities and relations. What has been overlooked in Dean’s narration of desire and disavowed in Butler’s reading of kinship is the possibility and exploration of a feminine perspective. The feminine perspective brings with it a relation both to the radically contingent *and* to intractability, or the real, precisely by virtue of the fact that the feminine subject is not afforded the same sort of support and limits by the phallic function spared the masculine subject. And as Dean rightly cautions, “[A]ny queer or feminist political theory that refuses to acknowledge intractability will remain less effective than it otherwise might be, because it will ceaselessly encounter the real as an unfathomable blockage of its political aims” (*Beyond Sexuality* 92). In other words, to respond at last to the question I raised above, as to whether or not psychoanalysis may seem rather sexually impoverished with respect to (some) other perspectives, I would like to argue that no, it does not. On the contrary.

Where psychoanalysis may appear limited resides in part in what I interpret as the too easy capitulation of the terms *feminine* and *masculine* to “gendered” readings. This happens both for gender theorists reading and sometimes writing psychoanalytic texts and for psychoanalytic theorists reading and writing psychoanalytic texts. As we



saw earlier, some Lacanians participate in a logic of sexual difference whereby it magically turns out again and again that subjects with apparently female genitalia “are” “women,” and so on. Butler damningly maps out the consequences of such readings with respect to family relations:

And when there are two men or two women who parent, are we to assume that some primary division of gendered roles organizes their psychic places within the scene, so that the empirical contingency of two same-gendered parents is nevertheless straightened out by the presocial psychic place of the Mother and the Father into which they enter? Does it make sense on these occasions to insist that there are symbolic positions of Mother and Father that every psyche must accept regardless of the social form that kinship takes? (*Antigone's Claim* 69).

It seems important to imagine a queerer future for Lacanian psychoanalysis wherein terms like “the desire of the mother” and “the law of the father,” still very much in currency, might be replaced (not, of course, without haunting remainders) by some new terminology that would better reference the psychical functions these terms index. But terminology shifts alone will not a queer theory make of contemporary deployments of psychoanalysis; we must also bear in mind Dean’s rigorous reminder that objects *a* emerge outside of and in excess to the frame of gender. And with respect to sexual difference, we must insist on the ways in which, for Lacan, the terms *masculine* and *feminine* signal two different logics, two different modes of ex-sistence in the symbolic, two different approaches to the Other, two different stances with respect to desire, and (at least) two different types of jouissance. Nothing here indicates “gender” as we might more conventionally conceive of it.

### **III. Transgender Subjectivity: An Expression of the Logic of Sexual Difference**

What would it look like to consider transgender subjectivity as an expression of the logic of sexual difference? What are the implications of such a move? This depends in part on what, generally speaking, we mean by the word *transgender*, and how it relates to the term *transsexual*. In the foreword to the *Transgender Studies Reader*, Stephen Whittle uses simply the word *trans* instead of either *transgender* or *transsexual*, reflecting the popular shift to the usage of a new, apparently more all-encompassing term. As he writes,

A trans person might be a butch or a camp, a transgender or a transsexual, an mtf or ftm or a cross-dresser; they might, in some parts of the world, consider themselves a lady boy, *katoey*, or even the reclaimed Maori identities *whakawahine* or *whakatane*. Some communities and their terms are ancient, such as the Hijra from Northern India, but many are more modern. The word “trans,” referring to a “trans woman” or “trans man” (of whatever subtype of trans identity) is a very recent take on the umbrella term “transgender” (xi).

While I am moved by the suggestiveness of a term like *trans* for forging politically motivated identificatory alliances, I would like to narrow down my own definitions of *transgender* and *transsexual* in the interest of a provisional amount of coherence, but with the expectation that no one definition of either of these words could satisfy or suffice. I would like to define the transsexual subject as a person who identifies with a gender that is not consonant with the gender assigned at birth. In some cases, but certainly not all, the transsexual subject will go to whatever efforts possible (hormone therapy, sex or genital reassignment surgery, etc.) to “pass” as that gender. Inasmuch as the transsexual subject strives to pass *and/or* (for not all transsexuals strive to pass) identifies with one gender or another with an apparent degree of certainty, he or she is psychically no different than any other subject who lines up under one banner or the

other.<sup>22</sup> *Ostensibly* “nontranssexual” subjects also strive to pass; they also identify with an apparent degree of certainty with one gender or another. In other words, “transsexuality” is not in and of itself any more extreme a type of symptom than is “man” or “woman.” Where transsexual subjects’ experiences may be different from those of ostensibly nontranssexual subjects, of course, arises in part from the fact that the latter have not, so far, proven particularly welcoming: from under the meager protection of their banners, they have not yet realized that they have no monopoly on the psychic experience of the semblance of “gender certainty.” Oftentimes, the upshot of this false monopoly on a piecemeal “certainty” is that transsexual subjects – particularly those who do not rigorously fit the demands of the public’s “incessant need to gender every person they see as female or male” (Serano 117) – are excluded, objectified, exploited, scapegoated, and silenced.

Transgenderism presents a slightly different situation, and this is the one with which this chapter has been occupied. For it could be argued that the transgender subject – as someone who is not necessarily or only very strategically invested in “passing” as one gender or another (e.g., someone who could be described as “bigendered” or “gender-fluid” [Serano 27]), as someone who may be invested in embodying a gender that would attest to what he or she may define as the constructedness of gender (e.g., “genderqueer” [Serano 27]) – would be the human subject as such, the unconsciously bisexual subject for whom sexual difference is only ever an incomplete, unsatisfactory solution to the failure of the sexual relation. In this way, transgenderism would figure as a solutionless solution to the impasses of sexual

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<sup>22</sup> See Serano.

difference, a sort of unconscious scene of undecideability, but an undecideability fundamentally shared by all human subjects, no matter their seeming “gender.”

But there is another way of reading transgenderism, or another transgenderism available to subjects, wherein transgenderism figures not as a solutionless solution to the impasses of sexual difference, but rather as an expression of the logic of sexual difference: a feminine solution. Hysteria as it is defined by Lacan is a profoundly feminine phenomenon and is characterized by the question, “Am I a man, or am I a woman, and what does that mean?” The hysteric tends to interrogate societal norms at large, oftentimes embodying a “subversive attitude” (Ellie Ragland-Sullivan 164) that arises in part from a profound suspicion that her own sexed and sexual body is incommensurate to cultural injunctions regarding gender identities. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan writes, “Lacan saw the hysteric as embodying the quintessence of the human subject because she speaks, as agent, from the lack and gaps in knowledge, language and being” (“Hysteria” 164). The hysteric is, in some senses, interested in nothing *but* the lack that, for example, Dean may be read to circumvent by focusing on the apparent multiplicity of object *a*. The failure, deadlock, and trauma of sexual difference returns for the hysterical/feminine transgender subject, irreducibly, in her insistent interrogation of the phallic function and in her very queer relation to the lacking Other.

Our question, then, might read as follows: what will the feminine/transgender subject do confronting a symbolic that she is “totally, that is, limitlessly inscribed within” (Copjec, *Read My Desire* 227)? For this, we do not have to look far – we might consider Antigone, or, if we wish to be more timely, we might pay attention to

art, writings, memoirs, and scholarship by various present-day transgender or, sometimes, transsexual-identified subjects. If part of the point this essay is trying to make, though, is that there is something transgendered about the human subject, and that this transgenderism transcends notions of gender, it follows that we need not be restricted by rigid definitions of gender identities to encounter the question, “Am I a man, or am I woman, and what does that mean?” Feminine subjects identify in multiple directions. More importantly, they demonstrate another sort of agility as well: “[Lacan] implied that for all the difficulties woman had with speech and the signifier, mistrusting its promises because they de facto fail her, a certain freedom to play was available to woman... [A]ccording to Lacan, ‘Women are less enclosed by discourse than their partners in the cycle of discourse’” (MacCannell 198–99). When we recall that discourses are “forms of the social tie” (Lacan qtd. in MacCannell 235) and that discourses as social ties move to cover over the lack of the sexual relation, we could argue by extension that the hysteric feminine subject in particular is structurally well situated to cycle through and fall between the cracks of discourses. Preoccupied as the hysteric is with the very question that discourse wishes to mask, she may be particularly well situated to “do something” to the social tie itself. And yet, despite (but also because of) her “freedom to play,” the feminine/transgender subject’s speech does not stop insisting that discursive flexibility, lest it be mistaken for a merry-go-round of liberating multiplicity, is a flexibility borne of and about at least two overlapping lacks: castration and a certain exclusion. Feminine/transgender speech materializes (sometimes, painfully silently) hollowed out by the deafening

significance of what it “is” to “be” a (divided) (feminine) subject, a truth that echoes across gender divides *and* blurs.

Ragland cautions as well: “Given that the hysteric’s fundamental question in the signifier is ‘Am I a woman or a man?’ she is at risk of being overtaken by the real in both the symbolic and the imaginary” (“The Hysteric’s Truth” 69). She later adds more pointedly:

How, then, does the hysteric reveal a truth worth noting? Subversion for its own sake or acting out is not admirable... It is, rather, this, that the subject, any subject except a psychotic, is divided. In varying ways, all individuals who are divided suffer from this. The master represses it in the place of truth. The academic puts it in the place of repressed knowledge. The analyst interrogates it. But the hysteric lives it; it is her badge of honor that she lives castration at the surface of her life and discourse... The hysteric does not say, as poststructuralists would claim, I am man and woman, the difference makes no difference... For her it is an either/or question.

This is the heart of Lacanianism: either/or. Either one is masculine or one is feminine. One is not both, except in the suffering of hysteria. Both is the position of suffering, not liberation. It is this truth of the hysteric to which Lacan pays heed (85).

Ragland’s explicit cautions notwithstanding, something seems to slip through the cracks here, and it again references the hysteric’s contortionist cycles, overlappings, and subversions: “One is not both, except in the suffering of hysteria,” Ragland writes, carefully. Consistently excepted, the feminine/transgender subject is perhaps in a unique position to enact social transformation. Being wholly within the symbolic but at an exclusive remove, she may have special affinities with what it means to change that which is “external” by a motion that cuts in immeasurable, infinitesimal directions, inside and out, for “the symbolic is not a set of conditions external to the subject, and... as a result, the subject who labors to change the world is already its product. The notion of a ‘change in the symbolic,’ understood as ‘outside’ the subject,

must therefore be supplemented by a ‘change in the subject’ as well” (Shepherdson, *Vital Signs* 39). This recalls Lacan’s explanation:

There can be no act outside a field which is already so completely articulated that the law is located within it. There are no other acts than those that refer to the effects of this signifying articulation and include its entire problematic – with on the one hand whatever loss [*chute*] the very existence of anything at all that can be articulated as subject entails, or rather is, and with on the other what preexists it as a legislative function (*Other* 125).

As she who *lives* the loss, “the very existence of anything at all that can be articulated as subject entails,” and as she who is limitlessly inscribed in that symbolic that preexists her, the act of the feminine/transgender subject may indeed “refer to the effects of this signifying articulation and include its entire problematic.”

Might we not also hear in Ragland’s words on the suffering of hysteria queer resonances of the precise sentiment of Whittle, who, while (self-consciously) no more able to stand in as “spokesperson” for a collective transgender community than The Woman is able to exist, nonetheless states, “[I]t has been through this articulation of the imposition of gendering on us by others that the position of suffering of those with trans identities has been heard”? Whittle speaks here to an order to which trans identities might be exceptional and to the suffering that implies, and, of course, he speaks of speaking. Just after, he identifies one of the new possibilities opened up for trans people thanks to the increased opportunity for “public articulation of a trans voice and trans consciousness”: “[T]o turn away, ultimately, from the relative safety of queerness and go beyond that to claim a unique position of suffering” (xv). If we are to dream of some liberatory remainder to this suffering subversion, it may – as Butler suggests from a different perspective – be locatable precisely there where

Antigone speaks her “aberrant” words (*Antigone* 58) – yes, where, sometimes, “gender is displaced” (82), but sexual difference is not. As Slavoj Žižek writes in response to Butler’s *Psychic Life of Power*:

The Lacanian answer to this is clear – “to desire something other than its continued ‘social existence’” and thus to fall “into some kind of death,” that is, to risk a gesture by means of which death is “courted or pursued,” points precisely towards the way Lacan reconceptualized the Freudian death-drive as the elementary form of the ethical act. Note that the act, insofar as it is irreducible to a “speech act,” relies for its performative power on the preestablished set of symbolic rules and/or norms. Is this not the whole point of Lacan’s reading of Antigone?

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked what gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis have to offer one another and whether it might be possible to integrate the two domains. To answer quite simply, Lacanian psychoanalysis offers gender studies what I read as a richly malleable framework for thinking through matters of sex, subjectivity, desire, and sexuality. Likewise, gender studies offers Lacanian psychoanalysis readers who are deeply, productively mistrustful and whose compelling perspectives on diverse social issues are driven by passionate commitment. Integration of the two domains can only ever be a scene of fruitful contestation, but it could also go further if contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers were willing to listen to their compatriots’ desires and to redefine some of their more exclusionary “shibboleths” (Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* 226), and if gender theorists were willing to reread psychoanalysis, again.



## CHAPTER 2

### Eunuch, Not-Eunuch: Failures of Correspondence in the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*

‘Amis, por coi t’ocis? N’i at nul recovrier. / En cest dol ke tu fais ne pues rien  
gaagnier’

*Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*

The *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* recounts the story of a beautiful saint born to a wealthy family.<sup>23</sup> Devoted to God and disinterested in either marriage or the lineage, Euphrosine runs away to the nearby monastery to live as a monk.<sup>24</sup> There, having taken the name Esmerade, a name the narrator specifies as “communaz a marle et a femele” ‘common to males and females’ (202; my translation, here and below), Esmerade will eventually encounter his father Panutius once again, when the latter visits the monastery where Esmerade has been living. Panutius does not realize that the monk he meets is the daughter he has been searching for (“Que sa filhe soit mones qui poïst esperer?” ‘Who expects his daughter to be a monk?’ [215]) and the two strike up a friendship that lasts thirty-eight years. Esmerade’s health and appearance deteriorate over the course of those years, and on his last breaths he tells Panutius that

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<sup>23</sup> For my choice of text, I rely on Raymond T. Hill’s 1919 edition composed of the four extant manuscripts. For a discussion of the variations amongst the surviving versions, see Amy V. Ogden’s *Hagiography, Romance, and the Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*, chapter one and Emma Campbell’s *Medieval Saints’ Lives: The Gift, Kinship and Community in Old French Hagiography*, chapter eight.

<sup>24</sup> On the subject of the cross-dressing saint in medieval hagiography, Valerie Hotchkiss writes that “[a]lthough relatively neglected today, these [female cross-dressing] saints were so popular in the Middle Ages that it is almost impossible to assemble all of the many versions of their lives” (13).

he is Euphrosine. The news leaks and “Euphrosine” joins the ranks of several sanctified cross-dressers memorialized in various accounts over the centuries.<sup>25</sup>

As a text that emerges around the fault lines of the meeting of competing discourses on kinship, *Euphrosine* sets itself apart from both the aristocratic conception of marriage as a form of exchange and the church’s promotion of marriage as a sacred contract between two parties and sanctioned by God.<sup>26</sup> *Euphrosine* is interested in neither of these forms of relationality, focusing instead on a relationship marked by neither exchange nor contract, sacred or otherwise. The *vita* thus offers a sort of case study of the conflicted state of kinship systems of the time while challenging the ethos of each of the predominant discourses. Euphrosine/Esmerade’s will to extract him/herself from systems of human exchange organized by narratives of marriage and descent will result in a series of abandonments that position Euphrosine as one who does not reciprocate, as one who cannot be counted on to fulfill her end of a bargain; but the problem of reciprocity also emerges in the apparent lack of correspondence between Esmerade’s self-presentation as a monk and previous existence as Euphrosine: “Que sa filhe soit mones qui poïst esperer?” The story challenges the idea that Euphrosine/Esmerade should be easily identified, instead making available a series of possible identifications – Euphrosine is a bride, a

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most famous of these compilations in medieval France was Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*. Euphrosine is not one of de Voragine’s cross-dressing saints, but Hotchkiss notes that the “*Legenda aurea* was printed at least one hundred and fifty-six times before 1500, more often than the Bible” (148). The earliest of the four manuscripts in which *Euphrosine* is found includes *La Vie de Saint Alexis* and *La Vie de Marie l’Egyptienne* as well as *Poème moral*, *La Vie de Sainte Juliane*, *La Vie de Saint Andrier l’apostle*, and *Li Ver del Juïse* (Hill 160). Simon Gaunt points out that “the manuscript tradition indicates that this text is more central to medieval literary culture than modern scholarship has allowed” (“Straight Minds” 449), asking, “Could this neglect in part be a result of its casual treatment of transvestism and homosexuality?” (449).

<sup>26</sup> See for reference Duby’s *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth Century France*.

daughter, an heiress, a runaway, a gem, a flower; Esmerade is a rock, a beast, a creature, a thing, a monk, a eunuch, a threat, a paragon of virtue – which do not add up to any recognizable whole. Each time that reciprocity would appear to have broken down, new relations become available. I argue that these very limits, fictions, and failures comprise the tender ties that exist between Esmerade and his father.

### **I: Cast Off and *Castrez***

Upon deciding to run away, Euphrosine elects first to become a nun. Having rejected her earthly family and inheritance, she is given the name Esmerade, or Emerald, and effectively wedded to God. In a scene of spiritual marriage, the poet relates that Esmerade is “gemme et preciose et bele. / Ele est jostee a Deu come piere en anele, / Car ele est s’espose et s’amie et s’ancele” “[Esmerade is a] gem, both precious and beautiful. She is united with God like a stone to a ring, for she is his spouse, his friend, and his servant’ (202).<sup>27</sup> Both partner and servant, earthly (piere) and divine (God’s own spouse), we could say that Esmerade – a nun at this point – grants to God the promise without reservation that she will not extend to her human counterparts.

Esmerade does not remain a nun for long, though; fearing that s/he will be too easily found by either Panutius or the man to whom her father promised her in marriage, he presents himself at a Benedictine monastery as a eunuch and asks for entry. Up until this point, Euphrosine has been in the habit of failing to fulfill her obligations. She has failed to reciprocate the love of her betrothed, failed to respond

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<sup>27</sup> Campbell sees in this “divine kinship” (94) an instance of the ways in which hagiography subtends and subverts human kinship relations, what she describes as an “effort in hagiography to think beyond the limits set by human social and sexual systems by demonstrating how spiritual relations are always in excess of human norms” (9).

to the requests made of her by her father, and generally cast off her loved ones and her duties in favor of a more divine relationship. When he enters the monastery, though, Esmerade will be the one who is cast off.

At the moment of Esmerade's entrance inside the monastery, the poet writes:

Parut sa blanche cars, sa face encoleree,  
Li olh vair et riant et la boche molee.  
La congregations por pou ne fut dervee.  
Cogitasion male lor est el cuer montee.  
Li jovencel l'esgardent cum beste saëtee  
Et dient en lor cuer : 'U fut ceste trovee?'  
Li saive ome ont la cose a dant abé mostree.  
Dient li : 'Fai oster cest castré d'entre nous.  
Ce n'est mie castrez, mais Sathan l'envïous.  
Qui nos vuet trebuchier en ses laz a estrous.  
S'entre ces jovenciaz estat un jor u dous,  
Ja en orons tal chose dont tot serons gragnous' (205).

Gaunt offers this lovely translation of that scene:

Her white flesh and fair complexion, her clear and smiling eyes and soft mouth were all too apparent. The congregation was almost driven out of its mind. Wicked thoughts came into their hearts. The young men look at her as if she were a wild beast and say in their hearts: 'Where was this creature found?' The wise men pointed this out to the abbot. / They say: 'Remove this eunuch from amongst us. He is not a eunuch, but jealous Satan himself, who wishes to trip us up into his snares and fetters. If he remained amongst these young men for a day or two, we will hear of things which will make us all grieve ("Straight Minds" 448).

Gaunt has pointed to the potency of sexuality to hagiographical writings, writing that, "in comparison to the more humdrum boy-meets-girl narratives encountered in other literary genres, hagiography offers accounts of diverse and unorthodox sexual activities" (440). In this scene, there is no "humdrum boy-meets-girl" encounter; nor, however, do we find a virginal saint's sublimely erotic desire for Jesus. Instead, we find a monastery full of monks responding to a "'passing' transvestite" (Gaunt 449),

and, as Gaunt points out, it is “noteworthy that *all* these young men are thought to be susceptible to homosexual desire” (449).

I agree with Gaunt that this scene can be read as an instance of homosexual desire, but I would like to consider Esmerade’s status here as both a eunuch and a “wild beast” in order to explore still more layers of “diverse and unorthodox sexual activities” (Gaunt 440), layers of sexuality that may be less clearly aligned to those hegemonic systems of identification organized around the categories of gender identity and sexual orientation. Euphrosine’s previous hopes for community with the other monks suffer a blow because of Esmerade’s conspicuous appearance, which Gaunt translates as “all too apparent.” The description of those qualities that drive the congregation “out of its mind” occupies only two of the stanza’s lines: “Parut sa blance cars, sa face encoleree, / Li olh vair et riant et la boche molee.” Thus Esmerade’s first appearance is brief, and so is the description of it; but it is also heavy, a supra-saturated enumeration of ungendered charms – flesh, complexion, eyes, mouth – dragging behind the verb “Parut.” These ungendered charms cause Esmerade’s new monastic brothers to look upon him not as a monk, a eunuch, a boy or girl, a chorus member or possible prayer-partner – all more or less fitting descriptions – but as one thing that he is not: “cum beste saëtee.” Meanwhile, the wise men, backward iconoclasts, see beyond Esmerade’s “riant” eunuch eyes to a Satan within. The young men have not asked for Esmerade’s exile, but the wise men worry about “things which will make us all grieve” – evidently that “ces jovenciaz” may ravage the smiling-eyed newcomer – and request Esmerade’s removal. As a result of this (mis)recognition,

Esmerade's chances at forging a community inside the space of the monastery come as briefly undone.

It is clear that something about the sight of Esmerade unsettles his observers to various effects, inciting feelings of desire, sheer anxiety, and the will to repression: "Li jovencel l'esgardent cum beste saëtee... 'U fut ceste trovee?'" The text suggests that the desire felt by the younger monks towards Esmerade may not have anything to do with Esmerade's gender or genders; in the young men's initial encounter with Esmerade, his status as a eunuch is powerfully overwritten by flesh, complexion, eyes, and mouth, features notably common to eunuchs, brides, boys, and girls. The text disavows both hetero- and homoerotic frames by indicating that, to these other monks, Esmerade registers as a wild beast and a "ceste." Recalling the "beste" that came before, "ceste" both objectifies and bestializes the monk newcomer, implicating erotic economies (beasts, monks, objects) irreducible to the humdrum, hackneyed or the heternormative. For those who find him beautiful, Esmerade is a thing, a beast, a creature; his humanity is in question, but he is a "thing" – or a non-human – who is avidly desired.

The word "chose" itself appears in the mouths of the "wiser" men: "'S'entre ces jovenciaz estat un jor u dous, / Ja en orons tal chose dont tot serons gragnous.'" For their part, the wiser men immediately associate the younger men's desires with Esmerade's apparently castrated state, identifying him as a "castré" who is not "castrez." "Remove this eunuch from amongst us. He is not a eunuch." There is an unsettling lack of correspondence between what Esmerade is called (eunuch) and what he is (not a eunuch). For the wise men, Esmerade's status as having enjoyed or

suffered a subtraction (castration) is complicated by a further subtraction: he does not belong to the set of “the castrated” either. Esmerade is so castrated he is not castrated anymore. He appears perhaps *more* eunuch than eunuch. He both under-belongs and over-belongs, unsettling identificatory categories as such.

The category of “eunuch” dramatizes Esmerade’s ambivalent allegiances and incomplete involvements in the visible realm, or the realm of the identificatory: is Esmerade a man? A woman? A cross-dresser? A eunuch? A saint? A rock? Up until this point, Euphrosine has explicitly rejected all the identificatory categories made available to her – “fiancée,” “daughter,” “heiress,” even “nun” – in favor of “monk” and “eunuch”<sup>28</sup> – the latter of which is immediately put in question by the wise men who have accepted Esmerade into the monastery. But perhaps Esmerade’s participation in a name that exceeds itself (a “castré” who is not “castrez”) qualifies as the best available fit, for in this way, the text gestures to the ill-fitted character of identificatory categories as such, suggesting that something “thingly” lingers on the other side of such names. “Eunuch” stands in as that castration with which Esmerade only partially coincides. Along these lines, the desirous and anxious reactions to Esmerade’s appearance index the dissatisfactions that haunt all gender expressions, the sense that (genitalia, social construction, or willful dis-identifications notwithstanding,) something is never quite finished about these categories “man,” “woman,” “trans,” or others: “Remove this man/woman/eunuch from amongst us. He is not a man/woman/or eunuch.” In other words, Esmerade’s presence harbors the potential to trigger, within those who regard him, the recognition that something

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<sup>28</sup> Ogden offers an interesting gloss on Esmerade’s status as eunuch; see pages 84-85.

“trans” cushions, contours, or exceeds all gender identities.<sup>29</sup> Esmerade’s arrival brings us to encounter the ways in which gender identities as such move to smooth out the myriad ways bodies and identities fail to correspond fully. The young men are driven wild with desire in proximity to such a thing. The “wiser” men appeal to the abbot to contain the threat.

Perhaps we could also extrapolate that here already, in this liminal (and luminal) position, under-belonging and over-belonging to the category of “eunuch” (among others), lies something of Esmerade’s saintliness. For the failure of correspondence – in this instance, between bodies and their possible identifications – is common to words themselves, and in particular, as Karmen MacKendrick argues, to sacred signs. And what is a saint if not a sacred sign? For MacKendrick, sacred signs are invitations and “seductive re-readings” (21). If, however, sacraments are “a kind of sign” (MacKendrick 23), as Thomas Aquinas asserted, how are sacraments different from signs as such? MacKendrick suggests that the difference is one of scale: “suppose the sacrament is a sign with peculiar intensity of significance and of meaning, in which every sign draws us into the mystery. That is, suppose what a sacrament does to a sign is to make it more so, to intensify it” (25).

For MacKendrick, “the sacramental sign operates under the rule of seduction, of signs at play,” but they are not “removed from reference altogether” (25). With the allusion to reference or a referent, MacKendrick would seem to preserve space for

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<sup>29</sup> My reading here is similar to Andrew Scheil’s interpretation of Smaragdus’s status in the Old English story the *Life of Euphrosyne* as a liminal figure that challenges gendered categories as such. Schiel suggests more specifically that “what makes the monks in the Life of Euphrosyne angry is not only their dismay at being assaulted by sexual temptation; they are angry at – and afraid of – the plasticity of the male body represented by Smaragdus” (354).



something beyond or beneath to which a (sacred) sign would refer, but she qualifies that referent with great care:

In sacrament... we find this semiotic play in the context of knowledge not in its utter absence or irrelevance, but in its infinite incompleteness and incompleteability, and its infinite desirability and attractiveness. The play of signs plays off of the tantalizing, withdrawing, beyond-being 'referent' that does not, cannot, quite refer, but is not ever quite empty either (25-26).

MacKendrick concludes her essay by stating that "the 'sacred sign' neither reveals nor points to what is hidden beneath or transcendently beyond" (30). The sacred sign "transfigures the present" (30).

Thinking Esmerade himself as a sort of sacred sign – and for that reason, in MacKendrick's estimation, as a sign notable for its augmented elusiveness (26), as a sign that transfigures the present, and transfigures what is present – allows us to wonder about the referent to which Esmerade himself refers, and how Esmerade transfigures it. For MacKendrick, this referent would be beyond-being, not quite empty, neither beneath nor beyond. But as we shall in a bit, according to Esmerade himself, the not quite empty referent, the not-beneath or the not-beyond, would be nothing as such: "N'i at nul recovrier" 'There is nothing to recover' (216). According to Esmerade, there is nothing to recover, nothing to be recovered, nothing that has been recovered. What if there is nothing to cover in the first place? If there is no beneath or beyond, nothing to be (re)covered, then we might be emboldened to dispense with the reading wherein Esmerade is simply a (saintly) woman who has put on the clothes of a (saintly) man, who at the end is discovered or uncovered as a (saintly) woman.

The story ventures into similar terrain when facing the question of human relations. Here the failures of correspondence will shift from the realm of the identificatory into the realm of language, as Esmerade will both attempt to draw limits for his human father and supply him with a series of apparently unfulfilled promises, positioning himself as one whose words are complexly “un-credible.”

## **II: Esmerade and Panutius: Relating Otherwise**

Before the first encounter between Esmerade and Panutius, the latter makes a few remarks illustrative of his own thoughts on the form and function of kinship.

Addressing the absent Euphrosine, he declares, “Tant [fort] vos desiroie une fois a tenir. / Entre vo[z] bras voroie ceste vie fenir” ‘Once I desired so much to hold you. In your arms I wished to finish this life’ (214). The abbot replies to this cry of despair by asking if Panutius would wish to speak to the most spiritual and sweetly spoken monk of the monastery, to which Panutius counters that no one – no “hom” – will be able to distract him from his mourning: “Une gemme ai perdue que hom ne seit prisier, / Ne n’at home soz ciel si sain ne si parlier, / S’i[l] ne la moi rendoit, ki poïst apaiier” ‘I have lost a gem that no one can estimate. There isn’t a man so holy or so well-spoken under the sun who, if he did not return it to me, could be able to appease me for it’ (214).

These remarks, uttered by Panutius in quick succession, capture the logic of kinship as governed by exchange as explicated by Claude Lévi-Strauss; Lévi-Strauss describes the exchange of women as necessary to the “mechanisms of reciprocity” (*Structural Anthropology* 60) at the heart of social relations. In his declaration, “Tant

[fort] vos desiroire une fois a tenir, / Entre vo[z] bras voroie ceste vie fenir,” Panutius would appear to evoke a rather outlying risk to familial marriage alliances: that a parent will not give up the child in question – even that the father will wish to finish his life in the arms of the bartered daughter – in short, incest.<sup>30</sup> In Lévi-Strauss’s account, however, the risk of incest is, in fact, in every way internal to kinship. Panutius’s remarks represent the other side of the exchange model of kinship: the notion that there is an object that is so highly prized, it must be given up. Panutius takes the logic of exchange to its limit by suggesting he may not wish to give up the object he is required to place in circulation. In other words, Panutius could be read as suggesting that, if once again given the opportunity to pledge his daughter to another in marriage – which would institute reciprocal relations with others by the guarantee of “the exchange of a third term who exceeds it” (Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess* xxxviii) – , he’d rather not.

Panutius, too, it would seem, has some deficiencies where reciprocity is concerned. Both Panutius and Esmerade resist the marital exchange that would institute reciprocity. Whereas Esmerade is disinterested in systems of human exchange and thereby fails to serve as the object that would guarantee social relations, Panutius is so invested in systems of human exchange – and specifically the precious object at their center – that he would prefer not to furnish the object that would

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, the risk is not so outlying, as is made abundantly clear in Old French literature by the sheer number of incest narratives: Old French literature is riddled with examples of father-daughter incest. See for reference Kathryn Gravdal’s “Confessing Incests: Legal Erasures and Literary Celebrations in Medieval France,” wherein Gravdal considers the “literary vogue of incest in the thirteenth century” (283) by looking at six Old French stories. See also Steele Nowlin’s “Narratives of Incest and Incestuous Narrative: Memory, Process, and the *Confessio Amantis*’s ‘Middel Weie’” and Elizabeth Archibald’s *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*.

guarantee social relations. They thus both resist the demands of reciprocity as imagined by the exchange model.

Instead of dismantling social relations as such, though, Panutius and Esmerade inaugurate a new relationality, one where no oath, woman, or God serves to concretize their tie; theirs is a relation without a localizable guarantor, where reciprocity functions as a fiction or a failure rather than as a given. This begins to emerge in their first encounter, for here the poet presents even the play of Panutius and Esmerade's initial misrecognition as fundamentally non-reciprocal:

Ele conut se pere, si comence a plorer.  
Les larmes de ses olz li veïsiés filer  
Et par sa blanche face jusk'al sain degoter...  
Il ne la conut mie, ne s'en sot apenser.  
Que sa filhe soit mones qui poïst esperer? (215).

She recognized her father, and starts to cry. You would have seen the tears of her eyes flow from her white face to her breast drop by drop... He didn't recognize her at all, nor did he think of it. Who expects his daughter to be a monk?

These lines constitute the last three lines of one stanza and the first two lines of the next. The poet deviates here from the strategy of monorhymed stanzas of ten lines by employing the same rhyme pattern for both stanzas; the aberrantly continuing rhyme allows Esmerade's recognition of his father to trail into the following stanza, wherein Panutius fails to recognize his daughter. Such doubling reinforces the knot-like and asymmetrical structure of the moment. The poet's language is plain: "Ele conut se pere, si comence a plorer." By contrast, Panutius "ne la conut mie." The poet indicates that Euphrosine's unrecognizability before Panutius's eyes is a matter of identification, and not one of appearance. The poet quickly adds that "Pale astoit del

renclus et maigre de juner, / Fraise de malgesir et tainte de plorer.” ‘She was pale from the enclosure and thin from fasting, tear-stained and weakened from poor sleep’ (215). But prior to this description of Esmerade’s changed appearance, the reason given for Panutius’s misrecognition of his daughter is not that she has become too pale and thin as to be recognizable, but that, quite simply, Panutius didn’t even think of it – “Que sa filhe soit mones qui poïst esperer?” Who expects – who could hope (poïst esperer) – for such a thing?

As Esmerade explains to Panutius, Panutius has been sent to him so that Esmerade may both comfort and chastise him: “De toi veoir avoie, certes, grant deseier / Por sol toi conforter et por toi kastier” ‘To see you I have, certainly, great desire, only in order to comfort and chastise you’ (216). Thus Esmerade modifies the terms of that relationship by indicating that he “only” (“sol”) wishes to see his father in order to comfort and chastise him. Esmerade excises an unidentified series of other possible modes of relating from the contents of their new relation, relations in excess of comfort and chastisement. His desire for this relationship is now “only” motivated by something akin to spiritual imperatives, and this constitutes a relational modification presumably imperceptible to Panutius inasmuch as Panutius does not realize that they are, or that they had been, as it were, already related. And, as Esmerade indicates, in the past they had been *otherwise* related.

In their first conversation, Esmerade assures Panutius of a future when the latter will see Euphrosine again, perhaps a future in the afterlife, stating that God does not wish for Euphrosine to be found *yet*: “Mais Deu ne plaist encore que ele i soit

trovee” ‘But it doesn’t please God that she be found yet’ (215). Esmerade asks for Panutius to have faith in the credibility of Esmerade’s words, continuing,

*Crede mi* [que] ta filhe est bone part alee,  
Et tel conseil at pris dont ja n’iert returnee.  
Ne t’esmaier pas, sire! Ele iert encore trovee.  
A tes oez le veras sens nule recelee (215-216).

Believe me that your daughter has gone in a good direction, and she has taken such advice that already she will not be turned. But don’t be frightened, sir; she will be found again. You will see her with your own eyes with nothing hidden.

Here, then, lies one of the key interpretive knots of the story. What are we to make of Esmerade’s apparent promise, that Panutius will see Euphrosine again one day with his own eyes? Is this a promise that Esmerade fulfills or betrays? Is it a promise at all? And if it is a promise to be betrayed, what kind of saint is this? Furthermore, what kind of comfort is this? Esmerade declares that Panutius will one day see Euphrosine with nothing hidden, thus that he will, in a sense, see an Euphrosine who hides nothing. But what has Euphrosine been hiding? Has s/he been hiding Euphrosine, or Esmerade? The word “nothing” appears three times in this stanza and the next, in two different guises. In the stanza that follows, Esmerade advises Panutius even more emphatically to renounce his search for his daughter, asking, “Amis, por coi t’ocis? N’i at nul recovrier. / En cest dol ke tu fais ne pues rien gaagnier” ‘Friend, why are you torturing yourself? There is nothing to recover. In this mourning that you do, you gain nothing’ (216). Esmerade lets Panutius know unequivocally that in his situation, there is precisely nothing to be gained (and “gaagnier” also means to sow, to engender, to win); the labor of love he performs will recover nothing. “Nule recelee,” “nul recovrier,” “rien gaagnier”: nothing hidden, nothing to recover, nothing to gain.

Perhaps this is no puzzle at all; at least this repetition is quite clear: beyond the desires for gain and engenderment, beyond the desires for a return in recompense for some expenditure, and beyond the desires for some hidden essence beneath the trappings of personhood, Esmerade declares that there is nothing.

Euphrosine's remains, we might say, complicate relations between Esmerade and Panutius, introducing elements of give-and-take and expectation. Yet at the same time, her absence is of the utmost importance to them, the gap that gives them the space to relate differently. Between Esmerade and Panutius, there is no other end to their non-bargain, no expected outcome or horizon of possibility, nothing to bank on or hope for, but instead a vertiginous lack of commitment, gift, or contract, a list of apparent "negativities" that open onto a very radical form of relationality. If before the two were tied by way of gifts (Euphrosine as gift from God), inheritances (Euphrosine as receptacle of Panutius's money), and contracts (Panutius's pledge to pass Euphrosine to her would-be husband), the alliance between Panutius and his monk-friend constitutes instead something closer to a contract-lacking proximity, a tie structured around the possibility or even likelihood of untying – an untying mirrored by Esmerade's visible deterioration – rather than on notions of agreement, progress, or posterity. As far as Panutius is concerned: either this monk is the man under the sun who has the weight in gold to pay for the jewel Panutius lost, or Panutius has been displaced to a different logic altogether. Somewhere in between these two possibilities constitutes the space the text carves out for itself.

In their second to last conversation, Panutius envisages his upcoming loss. Esmerade has taken sick to bed, and Panutius addresses him quite poignantly:

Frere, vos me laisiez!...  
Amis, or recommence ma paine et ma tristor.  
Tant que je vos ooie, ne sentoie dolor;  
En la vostre parole sentoie tal dolçor.  
E[n]tre les innocens ait la vostre arme flor!  
Je ne vos ost veïr angeles de tenebror!  
Ja ministres d'infer ne vos face paor!  
Michaël vos enport(e) a joie et a baldor!  
El sain saint Abraham soiés mis a honor!  
Et apostle et martir et tot li confessor  
Vos presentent a joie devant Nostre Sagnor! (217-218).

Brother, you are leaving me!... Friend, now my suffering and sadness start again. As long as I heard you, I felt no pain. In your words, I felt such sweetness. May your soul flower among the innocent! May you never see the angels of darkness! May the envoys of hell never frighten you! May Michael take you to joy and to bliss! May holy saint Abraham honor you! May apostles, martyrs, and all the confessors joyfully present you to Our Lord!

The use of the subjunctive, and in Hill's edition the accompanying exclamation points, indicate dramatic stylistic changes that define this moment with respect to the rest of the vita. Notably, Panutius does not mark his own suffering with nearly so much emotion, but reveals such intensity in his hopes for Esmerade in the afterlife. One is tempted to read these words as a very traditional sending-off speech given by a parent to a child. However, these anguished hopes do not issue from a parent or from within a familiar constellation of familial structure. Affect here cannot be subordinated to an obligatory demonstration, for Panutius is under no obligation to wish Esmerade well in the afterlife. No commitment binds him whatsoever. His words are not predicated upon a societal structure that preemptively binds them, that presupposes and declares their link; his words, rather, are the very material of a structure that loosely, provisionally, and perhaps uncomfortably links them. These particular words also follow directly from Panutius's own naming of the importance of signifiers to their



relationship: “Tant que je vos ooie, ne sentoie dolor; / En la vostre parole sentoie tal dolçor.” He responds to the sweetness of Esmerade’s words with his own singular *paroles*, for his are not adjectival statements, idiomatic reframings of some convention borne of a “blood” structure, but, precisely, subjunctive, words that “blossom among the innocent” and the non-pre-determined. As he strives to describe Esmerade’s uncertain future, he strips his desires for him of automatism, returning them to the realm of the incredible. The only future here is death, for such an outpouring comes about at the very moment at which the two are about to be separated: he wishes Esmerade well in his (next) abandonment of him.

However, as he goes on, Panutius’s tone changes:

Amis, or recommence ma paine et mes ahans  
 Et li dol k’ai soffert, ui at trente et uit ans,  
 Que je perdi ma filhe dont sui gries et dolans,  
 Que vos profetiziés et jë ere atendans  
 Que je la troveroie, mais or i sui fallans.  
 Je l’esperoie bien; folie est et nïans.  
 Ançois perdrai ge vos, cui ele ert si senblans;  
 Ans si senblans ne vi negun[s] gemel[s] enfans (218).

Friend, now my pain and suffering begin again, and the grief that I have suffered, for 38 years now, when I lost my daughter for whom I am grieved and suffering, when you prophesied that I be patient, that I would find her, but I am still waiting. I hoped so much; it is crazy and stupid. Today I will lose you who were so similar to her; so similar I never saw twin children.

Euphrosine herself and the realm of the visible intrude anew on what to this point had been populated by words, and these intermingled intrusions change the tone of their exchange from the impassioned well-wishes of moments ago. Euphrosine’s return and the return of the visible work in tandem to displace Panutius and Esmerade’s relation from one of spacings and an apparent radical lack of obligation, to one once again

answerable to contracts and promises. As the prospect of losing Esmerade sinks in, Panutius begins to panic, and he levels an accusation at Esmerade's long-ago and apparently unfulfilled assertion that he would once again see his daughter. As such, he discloses either that, underneath his tie to Esmerade, there has been a dream of a different one, or that at the prospect of this tie's dissolution, he reverts to the old, safely familiar, and infinitely disappointed logic of contracts and promises. Either way, Panutius's conversion has been difficult and incomplete. For if there is a bargain, Esmerade has not respected what Panutius perceives as his contractual promises, where by an idolatrous metonymy Esmerade, another *mediatrix*, becomes capable of divine intervention, or access to it.

We have known since the first stanza, though, that Esmerade lacks reliability, interest, or investment in the earthly realm of exchange, when the poet declared, "Por lui [Deu Nostre Sagnor] gerpit son pere et tote heredité" 'For Our Lord God she abandoned her father and all her inheritance' (191). In his relations with this visitor, Esmerade extracts himself from that realm once again, this time by means of seemingly unfaithful prophecies. Thirty-eight years before, he had presented the prophecy that Panutius would see his daughter again with nothing hidden. Even as he is apparently unwilling to furnish proof of the prophecy's potential veracity (and thereby live up to the promise that Panutius now implies he has been quietly banking on), at the same time, he in some senses constantly presents Panutius with the thing Panutius had requested. Simply garbed, skin and bones, shaven and pale, Esmerade is a more austere version of the amply-clothed, plump, fresh-cheeked Euphrosine of yesteryear. Esmerade is so naked he becomes invisible (so castrated he is not). By

way of these many *travestissements*, it remains open to interpretation as to whether or not either a vow or a promise has been made. Not knowing what exactly Esmerade's "word" entails, it is to that extent difficult to judge whether he has kept it or not. In one way of looking at the scene, Esmerade has quite simply lied, or he has failed to honor a pledge; such a reading renders his word rather *un-credible*. In another reading, Esmerade can be said to have kept the promise Panutius attributes to him, and thus in this sense has always already fulfilled the prophecy, but unrecognizably.

Esmerade replies: "Or te pri ke trois jors me gar en karité; / Ne me gerpis tu ja, tros k'aie a toi parlé" 'Now I ask you to take care of me out of kindness. Don't leave me until I have spoken to you' (218). This spacing sends Panutius precisely into the state of anxiety such things tend to, but he nonetheless tends to Esmerade: "Trois jors i fut Panuzes mut dotous et pensis / Et servit le malade cum ses privez amis" 'For three days Panutius was very uncertain and pensive and he served the sick monk as he would a close friend' (218). After which time, they have their final conversation, and Esmerade delivers the news Panutius seems never to have suspected: "... je sui la misele. / Je sui te chiere filhe cui tu norris pucele, / Que tu metis jadis a letre en ta capele. / Je sui Eüfrosine. Je sui icele bele" 'I am that wretched one. I am your dear daughter whom you raised from girlhood, whom you taught to read long ago in your chapel. I am Euphrosine. I am that beauty' (219). With each short sentence beginning with "I am," Esmerade/Euphrosine bursts forth in a fever of self-assertion, an emphatic iteration of selfhood. Here, in recapturing and reclaiming the identity of Euphrosine, Esmerade/Euphrosine also recaptures and reclaims the language of identities as such: in the intervening years of friendship with Panutius, never had

Esmerade relayed such a commitment to the “I” and its stories (that wretched one, your dear daughter, that beauty). In his/her former voice, Esmerade/Euphrosine reverts to something more familiar: that mode of knowing and relating that would find its coordinates around the stories of the “I.” He then makes a series of requests, qualified by the opener “se tu anc m’amas” ‘if ever you loved me’ (219). Without waiting for any sign of concurrence – and without Panutius having the chance to speak again at all – , he suddenly concludes: “Or me haste la mors. *Pater, ora pro me!*” ‘Death hastens upon me. *Pater, ora pro me!*’ (219). Esmerade’s last words ring out with the weight of the inscrutable, for as death hastens upon him, he switches into Latin to utter a fixed phrase and to address an unspecified *Pater*, presumably, God himself.

### **Conclusion**

The relations poeticized in this saint’s life are “transgender” in a variety of senses. First and most obviously, the saint/monk/eunuch at the center of the story: Esmerade is encountered not so much as ambiguously gendered, replete with multiple overlaps and departures, but as (stirring)ly elusive as such – a beast, a rock, a flower, a gem, a bride, a boy, a saint. Such substantives do not add up to a recognizable whole; in some cases, they are apparently mutually exclusive, but they share the common space of Euphrosine/Esmerade’s body. In their lack of familiarity to one another – in the sheer distance between a rock and a bride – the poet suggests that bodies are formed out of wide variables of conjunctions and disjunctions, singularities that fail to

correspond to any one thing in particular. Part of Esmerade's saintliness resides in transfiguring these fault lines.

The transgender ties in this story also revolve around certain propositions, propositions that are both saintly in their elusiveness and geological in their hard glare: first, as just noted, that a body may not match its identifications; second, that contracts do not always keep their promises (that, indeed, a constitutive impossibility to do so accounts for contracts' existence in the first place); and third, that a word may not match itself or its thing. The characters who encounter these barriers do not thenceforth abdicate community as such, finding in these failures a reason to give up on relations as such. To dare, instead, to organize a tender tie around these very failures is part of what makes *Euphrosine* so compelling.

Transgender relations prove rankling and enthralling for those moments when they depart from logics of relation organized by pre-determined contractual expectations, for the moments when they expose the impossibility of reciprocity rather than strive to patch it over, and for the ways in which such failures and incompleteness incite and invite, compelling patience, passion, uncertainty, loneliness, and care-taking. Esmerade's un-credible words provide a vantage point, at times perhaps an uncomfortable one, from which to approach the possibilities borne of failure, as do his failures to correspond to pre-determined gender categories. This mention of credibility, though, is not to suggest that a more credible or more original referent or essence may lie somewhere else, such as behind or beyond. To the implied geometry of this model, the psychoanalytic notion of semblance offers a resonant counterpoint. Serge André explains that semblance does not suggest that inauthentic veneers mask

subterranean truths, but rather, quoting Lacan, that “truth itself has the ‘structure of a fiction’... that the veil that clothes the truth, far from dissimulating, instead manifests that it is by nature a semblance” (143). This also recalls Freud’s famous footnote in

*The Interpretation of Dreams*:

now that analysts at last have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion... They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking... It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming (545).

While André indicates the formal and fictional status of semblance, Freud writes against the (analytic) attempt to read essences in the first place, and Esmerade himself states that there is “nul recovrier.” The form of the thing – its scars and recombinations, strange geometries, lies, and disguises, as well as its more or less non-linear state of incompleteness (for these forms will always be subject to interpretation and retroactive narrations) – constitutes the extent of the matter. According to MacKendrick, it also constitutes the sacredness of the thing.

In pursuit of a more divine inheritance, Esmerade inherits a more radical relationship with his abandoned father. Organizing this new relation around absences, abandonments, fictions, and failures, Esmerade and Panutius nonetheless – or consequently – form a very tender tie. Theirs is also a tie, though, that bears no balancing, rife with holes and subject to untying. As Panutius will say just after Esmerade’s death, “Eüfrosine, amie, que m’avez deceü! / Tant vos avoie quise, tant avoie attendu, / Mais or vos ai trovee et or tot perdu” ‘Euphrosine, friend, how you

have disappointed me! So much had I longed for you, so long had I awaited you, but now that I have found you, I have lost everything' (220).

## CHAPTER 3

### Beyond 'A Pure Passing': Transgender Voices in Joy Ladin's 'The Voice' and Heldris of Cornualle's *Roman de Silence*

In our everyday speech acts, the voice is an often-forgotten object cause of desire. A strain of materiality masquerading as something that could belong to someone, the voice is, as Mladen Dolar notes, "like a fingerprint" (22), inimitable; it marks the ones we "know," a tenor bearing the relief of familiarity or a rush of anxiety. Compared with the gaze, which has been mobilized in film and feminist theory as a critical problematic for thinking through questions of agency, identity, pleasure, and desire, the voice has not received the same volume of critical attention. Thanks, perhaps, to its intuitively physiological character, or to its seeming ability to *belong* to somebody, the voice has been difficult to situate as the site of a misrecognition; as Dolar writes, the voice "appears to lack a screen" – it appears as "a pure immediacy where one is both the sender and the receiver without leaving one's pure interiority" (39).

Transgender narratives of the voice, by contrast, relentlessly indicate a screen through which the voice passes. In narratives such as Heldris of Cornualle's 13<sup>th</sup> century romance the *Roman de Silence* and Joy Ladin's contemporary essay "The Voice," the voice is not one's own, or the voice one has is not the voice one needs, or the voice one has seems to speak from elsewhere. One is ventriloquized by the voice; one ventriloquizes other voices. The voices in these narratives are, alternately, foreign, artificial, studied, unreliable, strained, external, silent, unspeakable, musical,



and even “barely... human” (Joy Ladin, “The Voice” 252). They outpace the words they carry, producing unexpected meanings or no meaning at all; or they materialize in strange places, in some instrument other than that of the vocal chords. In these and other ways, transgender narrations narrate various short-circuits of the experience of “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak” (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 98), exposing the uncanny character of the voice as such. By situating this exposure in texts by and about transgender people, however, do such narratives indicate a “transgender” affinity with or suffering exposure to the effects of the voice as decentered and decentering? And/or do they suggest that it might be possible, desirable, and even necessary to arrive at a voice that would not entail such short-circuits?

The thirteenth century *Roman de Silence* and the contemporary essay “The Voice,” texts separated by time and language, are “transgender” in different senses: each narrates something of the drama of the crossing of gender, but for different reasons. Silence is born a “girl” but raised as a “boy” because of a law disinheriting women; he is not made aware that he isn’t like the other boys until around the age of twelve, a discovery that unleashes quite a lot of self-doubt. Ladin, by contrast, transitions – voluntarily – to living as a woman as an adult. Silence is, of course, a fictional character, while Ladin, a real person, represents in her essay some portion of her own experience. Additionally, Ladin’s text is written after the advent of discourses of transgender in the United States, while the *Roman de Silence* can only anachronistically be called a transgender text.

In fact, very little aside from the crossing of gender and a preoccupation with the voice unites these texts, and even the voices concerned are largely different. Each text foregrounds to varying degrees multiple dimensions of the voice, grappling not only with voice as object cause of desire<sup>31</sup>, but the voice in speech, and the voice as constituting in some way the meaning or coherence of a persona. Neither Silence nor the “I” of Ladin’s essay has easy access to these latter two forms of voice, and their experiences with the exigencies of the self that the voice would seem to express problematize the notion that a voice would simply translate a pure interiority. Heldris’s romance, however, situates these problems squarely within a question about the origin of the “sexed being” of the subject, here allegorized in the form of debates between the figures of Nature and Nurture: to whom does Silence belong? Is Silence authentically a woman, thus ostensibly belonging to Nature, or is he authentically a man, thus ostensibly belonging to Nurture? Which can explicate his (“sexed”) being? I will argue that Silence is able to find a voice (in his case, as a minstrel) precisely

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<sup>31</sup> The object cause of desire, or object *a*, is a concept I borrow from Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, objects *a* are representatives of the “eternally lacking object” (*Four Fundamental* 180) instituted by language into subjective existence. By way of example, Lacan points to the “oral drive” and its relation to food: “The *objet petit a* [object *a*] is not the origin of the oral drive. It is not introduced as the original food, it is introduced from the fact that no food will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by circumventing the eternally lacking object” (180). Objects *a* can take diverse forms, but Lacan selects the voice as one of the privileged representatives of object *a*, perhaps because it is often encountered in its uncanniness: Lacan writes that “we know [the voice] well... in its waste scraps, the dead leaves, in the form of the stray voices of psychosis, and in its parasitic character in the form of the interrupted imperatives of the super-ego” (*Séminaire X* 290-291, my translation). The voice as object *a* is useful to think insofar as it problematizes notions of “inside/outside” and their applicability to the human body: Dolar explains the voice as object *a* as “a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source... yet remains corporeal. This is the property which it shares with all the objects of the drive: they are all situated in a realm which exceeds the body, they prolong the body like an excrescence, but they are not simply outside the body either” (73). This all may sound very abstract, even mythical, and, to an extent, it is; as Jacques-Alain Miller has explained, “object *a* is in fact for Lacan a logical function, a logical consistency that finds its incarnation in what falls from the body in the form of diverse wastes” (“Jacques Lacan and the Voice” 139). While I find the voice as object *a* to be a compelling concept, and one which I think is alluded to in the texts considered here, the reading that follows does not revolve around it.

through accepting the impossibility of finding an answer to this question.

Furthermore, that his “sexed being”<sup>32</sup> remain inexplicable – that he be unable to be found to belong to either Nature or Nurture – will, I suggest, prove to be the condition of possibility of Silence continuing to have a voice throughout the text.

The contemporary essay, perhaps eschewing the naïveté or danger of asking after the origin of the “sexed being” in the first place<sup>33</sup>, situates the problem of the voice slightly differently, in a question about the authenticity of the self. Through the technics of the voice, the exercise of pitch, breath, and head and chest resonance, Ladin seeks to express an authentic self. Ultimately, the voice she constructs/discovers coincides neither with the voice of a man nor with that of a woman, but, again, with the voice of the self. Ladin arrives at this self by realizing that there is “no difference” (254) between what she is and what she wants to be; the screen has disappeared.

While for Ladin ventriloquism is (ostensibly) vanquished, it would seem that the properly sexed voice for Ladin transcends gender categories (much as I argue Silence’s does): “[My voice coach] didn’t want me to sound like ‘a woman.’ She

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<sup>32</sup> By “sexed being,” I do not mean “sex” or “gender.” With this term, I am calling on the psychoanalytic notion that we are “sexed” not because of genital morphology or hormonal or chromosomal make-up; rather, we are “sexed” because desiring. See Chapter One, “Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference.”

<sup>33</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick articulates this concern in her landmark text *Epistemology of the Closet* in the context of her own critique of the efficacy of the terms nature and nurture or what are also referred to as essentialism and constructivism. Sedgwick’s focus here is on the dangers of looking into the origin of sexual preference and identity, not “sexed being” in the general sense in which I am using it, but I suspect that she might be happy to expand her terrain to include this latter as well. As she explains, “I am ... eager to promote the obsolescence of ‘essentialist/constructivist’ because I am very dubious about the ability of even the most scrupulously gay-affirmative thinkers to divorce these terms, especially as they relate to the question of ontogeny, from the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought through which they have developed... it would seem to me that gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals” (40-41). The context of Sedgwick’s own concerns, as signaled by “the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought,” is the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

wanted me to sound like me” (Ladin 254). Both Silence and the “I” of Ladin’s essay embrace what I refer to as “compromise” voices. For Silence, the compromise voice of minstrelsy is a voice that will serve him whether he lives his life as a man or as a woman. For Ladin, the voice discovered at the end of her journey is surely not the voice of a man but neither is it simply identified as the voice of “a woman”; as, instead, the voice of the self, it transcends the brute binary of gender and is something more and something less than either of the above. In these and other ways, each text offers a different “trans” answer to the question of the voice and its various modalities of expression and disruption.

### **The *Roman de Silence*: The Voice of Inauthenticity**

The *Roman de Silence* tells the tale of a character named Silence, who, as already noted, is raised as a “boy” because of a law disinheriting women. Around the age of twelve, Silence’s father informs him that he isn’t like the other boys and Silence begins to be visited by Nature and Nurture<sup>34</sup>, allegorical figures who vie for his body and gender identity. Eventually, Silence runs away to become a minstrel, thinking that, whether he live as a man or as a woman, the art of music might serve him well. Later, he joins the king’s court and becomes known and respected for his virtue and military strength. When the queen falls in love with him and he rejects her advances, she sends him on a series of adventures which, meant to be his undoing, ultimately lead to his exposure. At the conclusion of the romance, Silence is publicly disrobed,

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<sup>34</sup> For a consideration of the figure of Nature and others (such as Lady Love and Lady Philosophy) in medieval texts, see Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*.

recognized as a “woman,” married to the king (who has put his former queen to death for her schemes), and never speaks again.

At the time of his birth, Silence’s parents name him Silentius, noting that, should “sa nature” ‘his real nature’” (98-99)<sup>35</sup> be discovered, they will change the *-us* to an *-a*: *Silentia*. Named for silence – because, as his father notes, “silensce tolt anse” ‘silence relieves anxiety’ (96-97) – Silence will be raised in seclusion in the woods by two surrogate parents who agree to protect the child and the secret. Silence passes a tranquil childhood as a model little boy. Eventually, however (Heldris does not specify Silence’s age at the time), Silence’s father Cador will tell Silence the circumstances of his birth, in a scene wherein he repeatedly refers to Silence as “son”: “bials fils... bials fils... Bials dols ciers fils...” ‘beautiful son... beautiful son... Dear sweet beautiful son...’ (114, my translation). Notably, Cador says nothing here about Silence *being a girl*, only that Silence must continue to cover himself: “Si chier come l’onor avés, / Si vos covrés viers tolte gent” ‘As you cherish honor, / you will continue to conceal yourself from everyone’ (114-115).

It is the narrator who, prior to Cador’s speech, provides the seemingly key piece of information that Silence was born a “girl.” He does so in a curious turn of phrase which puts in question just how confidently we can speak of Silence’s “sex” or “gender”: in Heldris’s words, (1) “Quant l’enfes est de tel doctrine / Qu’il entent bien qu’il est mescine, / Ses pere l’a mis a raison, / Se le demostre l’oquoison / Por que on le coile et le cuevre” ‘When the child was old enough / to understand he was a girl, / his father sat down to reason with him / and explain the circumstances / which had led

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<sup>35</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Sarah Roche-Mahdi’s edition.

them to conceal his identity this way' (114-115). The interest of the formulation is in its sparseness: as Heldris states, "il est mescine," suggesting that these categories – he, girl – can stand together, that they are more or less compossible. While Heldris periodically reinforces a model of gender whereby "underneath" Silence would "be" "a girl," a self to be concealed, there are also moments like this one where he configures gender as a site of compossibility, more horizontal than vertical.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after this, the silence in and around Silence will be broken by one, distinctive clamor: that of debates between Nature and Nurture, who visit Silence and debate for him. Up to this point, the narrator has presented Nature and Nurture in rather ambivalent terms. All in all, Nature seems to be the more powerful figure, but not necessarily the preferred one.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, Nature advises Silence to go to the sewing room and learn to sew: "Va en la cambre a la costure, / Cho violt de nature li us. / Tu nen es pas Scilentius!" 'Go to a chamber and learn to sew! / That's what Nature's usage wants of you! / You are not Silentius!' (118-119). As Jane Tolmie notes, "Nature's rebuke plunges Silence into self-doubt" (15). Nurture, however,

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<sup>36</sup> These moments arise in phrases where an apparent equivocation is offered as a simplex – "il est mescine" or "li vallés mescine" 'the youth who was a girl' (176-177), where "li vallés" is gendered masculine. These latter two equivocations/simplexes arise in a scene much later in the text, when Silence resists the seductions of the queen Eufeme. In fact, it may be that Heldris is mostly keen on reminding us that this boy is a girl because of the erotic excitement that may add to the scene. For a discussion of "lesbian desire" in the romance, see Kathleen M. Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French *Roman de Silence*."

<sup>37</sup> As Roche-Mahdi notes, Heldris, "[w]ith exquisite irony" (xix), associates *his* Nature with the very sophistry and misuse that the figure of Nature, in the tradition of Alain de Lille's *De Planctus Naturae*, generally denounces. On this point, R. Howard Bloch writes, "The *Roman de Silence* reads in many places like a vernacular version of Alain's *De Planctus Naturae* which its author most certainly knew" ("Silence and Holes" 84). Nature is responsible for Silence's exceptional beauty, and this represents a literary tradition and a specifically gendered one, inasmuch as "Nature appears frequently in Old French romance as creator of the most beautiful girl in the world" (Roche-Mahdi xvii). Indeed, this seems to be Nature's primary complaint against Silence's life as a boy: Silence has not been caring for the girlish beauty s/he was given by Nature. Hours in the wind and hot sun have made of him "une grosse oeuvre" (108).

appears to chase Nature away, telling Nature to leave her “noreçon” ‘nursling’ (122-123) alone and claiming authorship of Silence’s de-naturing: “Jo l’ai tolte desnaturee” ‘I have completely disnatured her’ (122-123).<sup>38</sup> “[P]oised between opposed identities and assailed by opposing powers” (Tolmie 14), Silence is, then, “temporarily paralyzed” (15).<sup>39</sup>

For the time being, it is Reason<sup>40</sup>, not Nurture, who stays with Silence to puzzle through the matter. A third allegorical figure who shows up to confer with Silence, Reason intervenes to offer a “third way” beyond Nature and Nurture’s debates, one that affirms survival and pragmatism in the face of the unknown. Reason is not interested in figuring out who, between Nature and Nurture, is more powerful; she does not care which one, if either, can claim Silence or more justly explain his being. She merely, and more devastatingly, relays that, “poi li valt mains de la mort / Se il s’acostume et amort / A deguerpir sa noreture / Por faire cho que violt Nature” ‘if he abandoned his nurture / for what Nature wanted, / it would be almost as bad / as killing himself’ (122, my translation). Reason raises the stakes of the battle for Silence’s body: the Old French relays this far better than my translation does,

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<sup>38</sup> It is interesting that Nurture speaks of Silence in the feminine here, given that, first, Nurture wants to affirm Silence’s masculinity and, second, that Heldris rarely refers to Silence in the feminine at all.

<sup>39</sup> According to Tolmie, paralysis will be “the position [Silence] occupies, in one way or another, for the remainder of the romance” (15).

<sup>40</sup> Newman also addresses the figure of Reason and her relation to Nature in Old French literature. With respect to their representations in Jean de Meun’s portion of the *Roman de la Rose* and Alan de Lille’s *De Planctus Naturae*, Newman writes, “Jean radically departs from Alan in positing a breach between Nature and God’s other daughter, Lady Reason, since in his view, only Reason enables humans to contemplate the divine order which, by definition, transcends Nature. Thus Dame Raison, the first of Jean’s authoritative speakers, upholds Christian sexual ethics” (“Did Goddesses Empower Women?” 137).

communicating through repetition (“mains de la mort,” “amort”) that what Nature wants for Silence would be, for him, a form of death.<sup>41</sup>

Silence agrees with Reason; he does not feel equipped at all to live as a woman, nor does he want to do so (124-125). Still, he does not find himself at peace. He remains torn, grief-stricken, suffering; as Heldris relates, “Et cuers s’est une creature / Mervelles d’estrangle nature: / Qu’il pense voir moult largement, / Torne et retourne trop sovent / Les larges pensers que requelt / Dont motes foie[e]s se due[l]t” ‘And the human heart is a creature / that has a strange and peculiar nature: / it thinks a great deal, / turns the deep thoughts it harbors / over and over again, far too often, / and causes itself a great deal of grief’ (124-125). This seems to be what Reason presents as, ironically, the livable option available to Silence – not that Silence would “know” where he “belongs,” but that he would sustain himself from the site of a forced choice, turning and re-turning “larges pensers,” dealing in grief, “paralyzed” (Tolmie 15) according to Tolmie, but, according to Reason, (at least) alive in this ambivalent commitment.

Finally, an opportunity presents itself, a way to find some sort of voice in the midst of this ambivalent commitment.<sup>42</sup> Two minstrels come to Cornwall and Silence

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<sup>41</sup> The verb *s’acostumer*, too, is a striking choice, inasmuch as Reason thereby suggests that, in abandoning his nurture, Silence would take on the habits and the costume of nature. In other words, this embrace of nature – a death embrace – would be, itself, covering, habit, a sort of additive – qualities we might today associate with “nurture.” As others have noted, Heldris provides another such subversion whereby Nature is explicitly associated with the “cooked” rather than the “raw” in the tragicomic scene with Merlin: Silence, who must capture Merlin, is advised to leave out delicious smelling cooked meat, for Merlin will be unable to resist the smell of cooked meat and Silence will be able to ensnare him. Indeed, Merlin smells the meat and starts to head towards it; Nurture intervenes, trying to stop him, claiming that she had nurtured him in the woods such that surely he would have relinquished his human nature and would now prefer herbs. But Nature literally drags Merlin to the cooked meat and Merlin will abandon his life in the woods, the irony being, of course, that the woods becomes Nurture’s domain and cooked meat becomes Nature’s.



decides that he, too, should become a minstrel. As he reasons, if, as a man, he proves to be no great knight, minstrelsy will prove useful to him. If he is to live as a woman, on the other hand, music could compensate for his inability to embroider. Silence imagines life as a woman as a situation of “captivity” that he would find boring, telling himself that “[s]i te porra mains anoier / Se tu iés en un bastonage / Ke tu aies vials *el en gage*” “[y]ou will be less bored / in your captivity / if you at least have something to fall back on” (134-135). As Linda Marie Zaerr notes, “Young Silence immediately recognizes minstrelsy as a bridge between the worlds of men and women, making up for the deficiencies in either” (109).

As Zaerr observes, the voice of minstrelsy represents Silence’s attempt to forge a compromise between the demands of living life as a man and those of living it as a woman, and, I would add, between the demands of Nature and those of Nurture. Silence does not adjudicate between Nature and Nurture, finding in one or the other the answer for his being. Instead, his ambivalence in the face of their claims – his resistance to being claimed by either one or the other – are, I believe, the very condition of his access to a voice, albeit a voice that is visibly exterior to his body, actualized at a distance instead of internally through equivalence or collapse. In these ways, Silence’s minstrelsy constitutes a “transgender” voice, one that has communion with both the worlds of men and those of women. In Tolmie’s words, “Afraid to be a (failed/not) woman, afraid to be a (failed/not) man, [Silence] nevertheless imagines herself as having some form of voice...” (16). But Silence’s minstrelsy also

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<sup>42</sup> For a marvelous study of the degree of Silence’s agency as expressed in the stylistics of the text, see Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr’s “A Stylistic Analysis of *Le Roman de Silence*.” Analyzing such features as deceleration and frequency, Ryder and Zaerr conclude that the romance’s language “consistently diminishes the audience’s perception of Silence’s power” (36).

constitutes a particular kind of “transgender” voice, one for which a certain sort of short-circuit, screen, or relay remains in play. To the extent that minstrelsy constitutes Silence’s voice at all, it references “a rupture in the middle of” (Dolar 42) full presence: Silence cannot mistake his voice, this voice in a *viele*, for an “auto-affective voice of self-presence and self-mastery” (41). Finally, Silence’s transgender voice also references “a void” (Dolar 42), the void created the moment neither Nature nor Nurture can account for Silence’s sexed being, “a void in which the voice comes to resonate” (42).

How effective is Silence’s voice at a distance? Zaerr explores this question in a fascinating analysis of those scenes in the romance in which Silence actually performs. As Zaerr points out, the *Roman de Silence* would most likely have been performed, but “[t]here is no incontrovertible evidence” (101) as to *how* it would have been performed. (Nor is there evidence that it was in fact performed.) Perhaps the lack of historical record on these questions explains in part why critics have tended not to consider the text’s performance in their readings of the romance. A musician herself, though, Zaerr discovers that a metaperformance of the romance opens onto important insights: if, as Zaerr states, the *Roman de Silence* “invites us to participate in a minstrel’s perspective on silence,” it is nonetheless “only in performance that this perspective is embodied” (99).

We are told that Silence becomes a fabulous musician, to the extent that the minstrels with whom he is travelling will eventually plot to murder him. Yet we hear relatively little about Silence’s performances. By contrast, we are told in precise detail about one of the other two minstrels’ performances (e.g., the songs and instruments

played, the popularity of one of these songs, the order in which they are performed, and so on [Zaerr 108]). Moreover, when these two minstrels perform, they are center stage.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in other romances of the time featuring a scene of performance, the character who is singing is allowed to speak (Zaerr cites *Daurel et Beton*, *Galeran de Bretagne*, *Frêne*, and *Aucassin et Nicolette* [103]). Silence, however – as Zaerr discovers when she decides to perform one of the scenes wherein Silence himself plays *viele* – is strikingly not on the scene during his own performance.

In the scene in question, Silence performs during a great feast at the behest of the duke. The other two minstrels initiate the concert, but Silence takes over when the duke wants to hear Silence and Silence alone: “... li dus nes violt consentir, / Ne mais Scilence solement. / Celui voelent oïr la gent” ‘... the duke wanted to hear Silence alone. / Everyone wanted to hear only him’ (152-153). And so, ostensibly, Silence plays, but the audience of the romance itself hears nothing more of Silence’s performance; instead, the focus of the scene shifts immediately to the other two minstrels and the lengthy conversation they have about their jealousy of Silence (152-157). Zaerr nicely sums up the irony of the passage: “Performance reveals eloquently the incongruous reality that Silence does not participate in performance at the feast, though logically he must be performing... I cannot make my *vielle* sing the melody of Silence while I am saying the words of the minstrels” (110). If, as I have suggested, Silence accesses voice at a distance, through his *viele* and harp, Zaerr’s reading of this

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<sup>43</sup> In her narration of her own experience of performing this scene, Zaerr remarks that she finds the transitions from one minstrel to the other “comfortable and believable,” that she “could hint at simultaneous performance of *vielle* and harp by plucking the lower strings with [her] left hand while [she] bowed the higher strings,” and that all in all performing the scene “reveals a high degree of agency in the minstrels” (108-109).

scene indicates that this access to voice constitutes uncertain ground for Silence's performance of self. There is, in a sense, a double screen at work in Silence's relation to voice: twice he is displaced from self-presence, twice removed from pure immediacy.

One day, Silence returns to Cornwall. He walks right up to his parents that day playing his *viele*, but they do not recognize him; still, Cador agrees to speak privately with the unknown minstrel in hopes of having some news of his missing son. After a moving scene wherein Helderis emphasizes the great irony of Cador's longing to see his son again when his son is right in front of him, Silence breaks in with this declaration:

'Sire,' fait il, 'vos fils vos prie  
Que vos merci aiés de lui.  
Bien reconois que grant anui  
Avés eü por moi, bials père,  
Vos et mi parent et ma mere.  
Merchi de vostre engendreüre!  
Vos savés bien de ma nature:  
'Jo sui,' fait il, 'nel mescréés,  
Com li malvais dras encreés  
Ki samble bons, et ne l'est pas.  
Si est de moi! N'ai que des dras,  
Et le contenance et le halle  
Ki onques apartiegne a malle.'

'Sire,' he said, 'your son begs of you  
to have pity on him.  
I see very well that you have endured dreadful suffering  
on my account, dear father,  
You and my family and my mother.  
Have pity on your offspring!  
You know my nature very well.  
I am,' he said, 'believe me,  
like an inferior piece of cloth  
powdered with chalk, that looks good, but isn't.  
That's what I am! I have only the clothing

and bearing and complexion  
that belong to a man' (170-171).

In this scene, Silence does not disclose himself as Cador's daughter, but neither does he disclose himself unequivocally as Cador's son. Instead, in what seems to be the closest thing to a proper identification for Silence, he discloses himself as Cador's fake son, "[k]i samble bons, et ne l'est pas." Silence, in other words, wants nothing to do with "a pure passing" (Dolar 36); what authenticity he has resides, paradoxically, in inauthenticity: "Vos savés bien de ma nature... Si est de moi!" With the metaphor of the "malvais dras," Silence suggests that his masculinity is a piece of fabric that will tear under stress, indeed, in a sense, thereby performing that very possibility. If on the one hand he apologizes that he has only the clothing, bearing, and complexion of a man, he also qualifies that apology; with the word "onques," he undermines the extent to which these terms belong to the category "malle" as well: these clothing, bearing, and complexion once, or under certain circumstances, belong/ed to a man. Silence thereby resists narratives of authenticity in every available direction: his passionate outburst suggests that it is not only that he is neither an authentic man nor an authentic woman, but that it would be difficult to locate once and for all the qualities that could index the authentically gendered subject.

This scene speaks, among other things, to Silence's intense discomfort with passing as a man before his father. To suggest that Silence is discomfited by passing as a man before his father, however, is not to suggest that Silence wants to be recognized by his father as a "woman" – nowhere in the romance does he indicate anything along these lines. Instead, Silence seems to want to be recognized as a

“(failed/not) man” and it may be precisely with his father that Silence finds a space where that would be possible.

If, as Zaerr suggests, minstrelsy makes up for the deficiencies in both the gendered universes available to subjects in the thirteenth century (and, largely, today) – “man,” “woman” –, then Silence seems to suggest in this scene that it ought not make up for those deficiencies too well; having a voice should also involve leaving some room for failure, for the inadequate, the incomplete, the patched up, and the inexplicable. When his musical voice allows him to “pass” too well, or allows him the appearance of authenticity, Silence is moved to speak to his father to redress the matter. Thus does Silence not only find in minstrelsy a sort of “compromise” voice, one which serves as a solution to what could otherwise be a paralyzing site of ambivalence; in this scene with his father, he goes so far as to speak in order to affirm inauthenticity and ambivalence. Instead of finding an “image” or “answer” for his “being” in either of the figures of Nature or Nurture, or in either the identity of that of “a real man” or that of “a real woman,” Silence follows the insights of Reason, sustaining himself at a site of ambivalence, grief-stricken at times – as in this scene – but, at least, orbiting the inexplicable with a voice.

### **Joy Ladin: The Voice of the Self**

Ladin, too, is looking for a voice, but an authentic one. Ladin beautifully narrates the steps that lead her to the “voice of [her] future” (254), a voice that not only allows people to “‘read’ [her] voice as female” (253), but a voice that can be “something to relax into, to accept in all its husky imperfection” (254).

Ladin does not speak of this process in terms as explicitly grim as Reason's. As we have seen, Reason points out that Silence's embrace of Nature would be a death-embrace. Still, the transition Ladin describes is lonely, even humiliating (251), and she narrates far more extensively the day-to-day frustrations of vocal transitioning, a problem not in play in the *Roman de Silence*, where Silence easily adopts a minstrel voice and is never questioned about his gender. Ladin explains that most of the changes effected by a regimen of hormonal replacement will help her body to be "read" as that of a woman, but that hormones will not change her voice: "It would be slow," she writes, "like natural puberty... but, given a proper hormone replacement regimen, it would be inexorable, and by the end of two years, my body should 'read' as female" (249). But, "Hormones wouldn't transform my genitals... Hormones wouldn't change my skeletal structure... And hormones wouldn't change my voice" (249). Grim in this moment, Ladin writes, "The first two were daunting but expected. The last was devastating" (249).

Even though Ladin begins by noting that hormones' inability to change her voice to one that can be "read" as female is, for her, devastating, she goes on to explain that she rather liked her male voice. This liking, however, strongly qualified, speaks to the misrecognitions which have already framed Ladin's existence: "My voice was the one male part of me I didn't loathe..., the one means I'd found to touch other people without being touched and thus physically reminded of the foreignness of the body they mistook for me" (249). Touching without being touched, Ladin's male voice allows her to have contact with others without suffering the alienating effect of being made aware of her body, a body she identifies not as "my body" but as "the

body” – “the body they mistook for me.” People misrecognize Ladin when they recognize this body as her. “The body” stands like a screen between Ladin and others, and only her voice is able to reach around that divide, trying to make up for it, but only ever in one direction, for Ladin touches with her voice without being touched in turn.

If her body is “the body,” her voice, on the other hand, is a “male part of me,” an organ or appendage, something “male” that is, in a sense, attached to “me,” but, unlike other male parts, not loathsomely. She explains that she worked on her male voice, “to sound honest, concerned, angry, soulful, playful, deadpan” (249). Even before her transition, then, the voice for Ladin is a muscle, a tool, an object of study, and, in this sense, neither natural nor automatic. As Ladin notes with respect to her male voice too, “I *learned* to think of that voice as me” (250, emphasis added).

In transitioning, Ladin will have to de-familiarize herself from the voice she has come to recognize as her very self; but, as she asks, “How could any other voice feel like mine, like an authentic expression of me?” Ladin first describes her lack of success with advice she finds online: “to cut out the chest resonance that men typically use to amplify their voices...,” to “direct my air-flow to the small cavities in my head...,” “to sing along with deep-voiced women singers...” (251). The upshot of this wealth of information is that “My growing list of things to remember to do and not do when talking turned speaking into an exhausting and humiliating exercise; the only thing I was sure I’d learned was that every sound that came out of my throat proved I wasn’t a woman” (251). We see in these avowals that Ladin’s voice has already begun to transition, not from the voice of a man to that of a woman, but from the only



reliable coordinate in a foreign body to, in Ladin's perception, "humiliating" "proof" that she isn't a woman.

Ladin's next attempt is a free online manual which counsels her to do "extensive voice exercises every day for the rest of my life" (252). Ladin throws herself into this venture, and her voice begins to change, but she describes the effect as, ultimately, the loss of voice as such: "I no longer had anything that could be called 'my voice'" (252). Ladin's wording here is quite desolate: at this critical juncture, she finds that she has *no* vocal accompaniment to her nascent sense of self. Stranded from "her voice," Ladin has now

a new voice, or rather a series of new voices... These voices were strained, unreliable, and required constant thought and effort.... Even when I talked to my closest friends, those who really knew what I was going through, I couldn't shake the sense that my voice was a caricature they listened to with pity (252-253).

Speaking of voices in plural, Ladin isn't sure if these new voices are a voice at all or – in what amounts to a fittingly strained metaphor – a caricature of one. In the process of transitioning, Ladin's voice betrays her more than ever, carving out new gullies between Ladin and her family, her most trusted friends, and her identity as a woman as such.

The essay does not end on this note, of course. What next happens to Ladin's voice will be only a subtly different transformation but a vastly more sustainable one: a friend gives Ladin three lessons with a professional voice coach. Ladin reports: "She adjusted my pitch downward, opened my air passages to increase breathiness, cut some of my head resonance and added a trace of the chest resonance I had eliminated months before. The result was a voice that sounded and even felt easy and natural. She

didn't want me to sound like 'a woman.' She wanted me to sound like me" (253-254). After having striven to internalize a bewildering array of modifications, Ladin finds with this coach an easy, natural voice borne of small adjustments, adjustments that suggest that Ladin's female voice was never so far off after all.

Yet:

The ease of that voice made it hard for me. My life had always been defined by discomfort with myself. The steps I had taken to find my female self had increased that discomfort, reminding me, every time I opened my mouth, of the difference between what I was and what I wanted to be.

But according to my voice teacher, the only way I could find my female voice was to realize that there was no difference between what I was and what I wanted to be (254).

Ladin does not say more about this matter, how the ease of her voice makes it hard for her. We might wonder what she might have told us had she dwelled longer on this point; are there newfound instantiations of the screen of the voice encountered even at the point at which she arrives at this hard-fought ease?

### **Conclusion**

At the end of Ladin's essay, we may rejoice with her at her discovery that there is no difference between what she is and what she wants to be. Silence's end is not so joyous. At the conclusion of the romance, Silence is finally rendered silent. After a series of dramatic adventures, near-death experiences, wars, seductions, and narrow escapes, Silence is identified as a "girl" in front of the whole court and publicly undressed; it is Merlin who speaks: "Si est desos les dras meschine" 'he is a girl beneath his clothes' (306-307). Both during and following this disclosure, Silence is praised for his valiance, wisdom, and loyalty, until Heldris finally declares, (4)

“Silence atorment come feme. / Segnor, que vos diroire plus? / Ains ot a non Scilensiüs: / Ostés est –us, mis i est –a / Si est només Scilentiä” “They dressed Silence as a woman. / Lords, what more can I say? / Once he was called Silentius: / they removed the –us, added an –a, / and so he was called Silencia’ (312-313). Heldris puts Silence’s agency in these final scenes in grave doubt: an anonymous “they” dress Silence as a woman, and Heldris himself is rendered nearly speechless by the enormity of the thing: “Lords, what more can I say?” Yet, dressed as a woman, Silence remains, for one last moment, “he”: we know this based on the writing – “només”: now a “he” dressed as a woman, a “he” with the name Silencia, Silence’s newest (and most fleeting) gender is visible in writing, but silent everywhere else.

The contemporary text ultimately restores pure interiority to Ladin’s voice; through her experience of vocal transition, Ladin leaves behind both familiar discomfort and the uncanny plurality of the “barely human” to find a more fully self-present voice than ever before. Ladin expresses this success in strikingly spatial terms: she has had to realize that “there was no difference between what I was and what I wanted to be.” The screen has been dismantled, distances collapsed. As Ladin finds that she is no longer a caricature of herself, presumably the distance that previously separated her from her loved ones is disappearing now too.

The medieval text, on the other hand, takes the opportunity of a transgender narrative to communicate, however inadvertently, a message about the fundamental inexplicability of sexed being. I have been arguing that Silence’s access to any sort of voice – any music, speech, or persona – depends on the space created by that inexplicability. Once he gives himself over to Nature, who stands in as one

explanation for his sexed being, he is thenceforth silent. By contrast, Ladin narrates an entirely different sort of space – space for the idea that, for some, it is possible to recognize oneself in one’s voice; it is possible, desirable, even potentially necessary, to arrive at self-recognition in the voice. That this space should be available for both transgender and non-transgender people is the implicit message of the text.

According to Dolar, “[t]o hear oneself speak – or simply, just to hear oneself – can be seen as an elementary formula of narcissism that is needed to produce the minimal form of self” (39); “[t]he moment there is a surface which returns the voice, the voice acquires an autonomy of its own and enters the dimension of the other; it becomes a deferred voice, and narcissism crumbles” (40). Heldris and Ladin agree: a minimal sense of self is necessary. Ladin finds hers once she realizes that there is no difference between what she is and what she wants to be, when, in other words, the screen through which the voice passes at least seems no longer to be in operation. Silence, however, locates his in, first, a deferred voice – the sort of voice that, according to Dolar, causes narcissism to crumble – and, later, in his very inauthenticity (“Si est de moi!”). While both paths function as a form of survival, Silence’s explicitly retains the unknown, and thus a void where the voice – site of both self-recognition and alterity, alternately uncanny and orienting – may resonate in all its forms.

## CHAPTER 4

### Signifying Without Limit: The *Isle des Hermaphrodites*

The *Isle des Hermaphrodites* presents in caricatured form the possibility of (re)signifying (the body) without limit.<sup>44</sup> Part travel narrative, part dystopic vision of the “Old World” and its others, the novel is usually identified as a satire of the court of Henri III (1574-1589)<sup>45</sup>, a king variously accused of bisexuality, sodomy, effeminacy, and, of course, hermaphroditism. In keeping with more virulent strains of anti-hermaphroditic sentiment circulating at the time<sup>46</sup>, Artus presents the hermaphrodites of his imaginary island as enthusiastic proponents of rape, murder, and incest; they target in particular religion, family, and the state, revealing each social structure as ultimately vulnerable and lacking in foundation. If, though, the hermaphrodites can be said to approach the symbolic – or the order of language imposed without foundation on human subjects – as a site of ruse to be exposed for its laughable shortcomings, they are not, for all that, unambivalent representatives of a certain pre-Sadean “‘delight in evil’ [*bonheur dans le mal*]” (Lacan, “Kant with Sade” 765): they are, for

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<sup>44</sup> Long provides a history of debates regarding the name of the author (*Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* 215). Historical references alternate between “Thomas Artus” and “Artus Thomas.” I will follow Long in referring to the author as Thomas Artus; her own choice is based on Pierre Bayle’s entry on the author in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1697) (Long 216).

<sup>45</sup> This is certainly how Pierre de l’Estoile, contemporary of Henri III and compiler of political material of the period, interpreted the novel: his first footnote of the novel states that “cette prétendue Description est une Satyre Allégorique du Regne de Henri III, de son Gouvernement, de sa mollesse, & de la vie effeminée de ses Favoris” (*Journal de Henri III et de Henri IV : Memoires pour servir a l’Histoire de France, ou Journal de Henri III. Roy de France & de Pologne. Tome IV* 3). There has been relatively little scholarship on the *Isle*, but for the most part, those authors who have treated the novel to more attention than that of a footnote make reference to the significance of the rule of Henri III and his court of Favorites to the novel’s satirical thrust. Frank Lestringant, in an intriguing reversal, has argued that the novel is directed against Henri IV (*Le Livre des îles: Atlas et récits insulaires, de la Genèse à Jules Verne*).

<sup>46</sup> See for reference Agrippa d’Aubigné *Les Tragiques* and Theodor de Bry’s *America*. For a discussion of the uses of the word “hermaphrodite” at the beginning of the seventeenth century, see the “Introduction” to Claude-Gilbert Dubois’s 1996 edition of the novel.

example, welcoming ambassadors to the narrator who subsequently describes them and charming aesthetes whose daily rituals feature activities apparently no more violent than that of getting a perm. Violence here is generally consigned to the background, referenced through allusion (as in the sumptuous décor, where we see fragments of the stories of Heliogabalus [73-75] or Ovid's Caenis/Caenus [70]) or in anamorphic stains of horror (such as when the narrator first reads a scene at a hair salon as one of torture [61]). I will return to these scenes, but suffice it to say for the moment that, while Artus draws back from directly representing the limitless violence called for by the hermaphrodites' laws, violence is – sometimes quite literally – in the background of the novel.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> There has been quite a lot of excellent scholarship on the significance of the figure of the hermaphrodite in early modern France. As Long notes, “For an identity that is effaced by the legal system, intersexuality, particularly in the form of the hermaphrodite, is one of the most visible figures of the time” (5). Horrifying portent and epistemological puzzle, the hermaphroditic body of the late sixteenth century figured simultaneously as monster, icon, thought experiment, and symbol of the anxieties and possibilities of (sexed, gendered) embodiment. In many ways, Artus's novel offers an ideal venue for the exploration of what Gary Ferguson has described as early modern France's “veritable cultural obsession” (*Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance* 27) with the figure of the hermaphrodite, for the novel toys simultaneously with competing understandings of hermaphroditism circulating at the time. According to Ferguson, this obsession with hermaphroditism was “no doubt fuelled... by the neo-Platonic revival and the vogue of the figure of the androgyne” (27), and Ferguson asserts that while the idea of the hermaphrodite “encourages the idea of sexual indeterminacy and tests the limits of gender separation versus human unity” (27-28), “what is crucial is that division” (28). In other words, while the hermaphrodite can signify either “double or between” (28), it is division as such that emerges as the transfixing idea. On the novel itself, Ferguson writes that “[t]he most notorious instance of the satirising of the court of Henri III through the figure of the hermaphrodite was to appear... in the early seventeenth century, under the reign of Henri IV. *L'Isle des Hermaphrodites*, published around 1605 and attributed to Artus Thomas (or Thomas Artus), sieur d'Embry, is a far from straightforward text, however. A number of critics have argued that the spirit of the work is in fact more in line with the libertine attitudes and licentiousness of the court of Henri IV than with that of his predecessor. Moreover, in the same way that the material of parody is present in the target model, so, conversely, an element of seriousness, even utopianism, has been discerned by a number of scholars in the *Isle*” (*Queer (Re)Readings* 265). See for reference Ferguson's “Androgynes, Hermaphrodites, and Courtesans: Women, Queer Nature, and (Queer?) Pleasure” in *Queer (Re)Readings*. See also Long's *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*, where she provides an excellent analysis of Artus's novel as well as extensive readings of the writings of anatomy professor Caspar Bauhin and surgeons Ambroise Paré and Jacques Duval, all of whom published on hermaphroditism in the early modern period. See also Ruth Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*; Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass's “Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe”; Lorraine

In the pages that follow, I will consider the hermaphrodites' aesthetics of covering and instability and their laws about language and invention, finding in these a different version of "transgender subjectivity" from that explored in the rest of the project. I would like to suggest that, in their approach to limits, the hermaphrodites embody a "masculine" transgender subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> While Esmerade of the *Vie de Sainte Euphrosine* and Silence of the *Roman de Silence* embody a "feminine" transgender subjectivity, such that Esmerade imposes new limits and Silence suffers from the inescapability of them, Artus's hermaphrodites glory in doing away with limits. Imagining a world without limit is their joy, inspiration, and *défi*. When limits do emerge in the novel (for the proliferation of possibility depends just as surely on encounters with limits), they emerge (with one notable exception) as, again, anamorphic stains of horror that are quickly resolved and recalibrated.

The novel opens with a narrator who offers a commentary on how European encounters with the "New World" have awakened insatiable desires for the new: "Le nouveau monde nous a produit en ce nouveau siècle tant de choses nouvelles, que la pluspart du monde ancien, mesprisant son antiquité, a mieux aimé chercher, au peril

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Daston and Katharine Park's "The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France"; and Todd Reeser's "Ruling the Hermaphrodites: Masculinity, Sovereignty, and National Identity in Political Discourse," which considers the sociopolitical stakes of the *Isle des Hermaphrodites* and the ideals of masculinity and moderation in the construction of both kings and fathers. Reeser offers the compelling idea that, for the novel, "a fallen masculinity is more the issue than sexual or gender fluidity per se" (242).

<sup>48</sup> In reading the hermaphrodites in this way, I mean to explore the idea that transgender subjectivity would be exclusive neither to subjects who identify as transgender nor to "feminine" subjects (who, again, may or may not identify as transgender). By "masculine," I mean to reference not just Lacan's "masculine" subject position as such but, more specifically, a perverse one. As with my discussion of hysteria in Chapter One, I do not present or regard these interpretations as pathologizing. Instead, I see my aim as similar to that of Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Cvetkovich writes in part in the interest of de-pathologizing trauma itself, thereby emptying certain claims about the relationships between trauma, incest, and lesbian sexualities of their potentially pathologizing and disciplinary force.

de mille vies, quelque nouvelle fortune, que se contenter de l'ancienne et vivre en repos et tranquillité” “The new world has produced for us in this new century so many new things that the majority of the old world, despising its antiquity, preferred to seek, to the peril of thousands of lives, some new fortune rather than content itself with the old one and live in peace and tranquility” (53-54, my translation, here and below).<sup>49</sup> The narrator's view on this pursuit of the new, already suggested by the mocking repetition of the word “*nouveau*,” is succinct: “Et ainsi desirant les hautes aventures, ils rencontrent le plus ordinairement celles qui terminent tous leurs desirs, sans avoir jouy du contentement qu'ils recherchoient” “And so desiring high adventure, they most commonly encountered those that brought an end to all of their desires, without having enjoyed the contentment they were seeking (54). Following this, we encounter one such adventurer, the second narrator, “un de nos François” ‘one of our Frenchmen’ (54). Upon introduction, this traveler is associated with blood: Artus identifies him as “un de nos François qui n'avoit pas moins de valeur que de prudence, mais à qui une bonté naturelle avoit osté la puissance et la volonté de tremper ses mains dans le sang des siens” ‘one of our Frenchmen who did not have less valor than prudence; but a natural goodness had taken from him the force and the will to dip his hands in the blood of others’ (54). After years of escape from “sanglantes tragedies” ‘bloody tragedies’ (54), France's Wars of Religion, the traveler returns to regale a group of his friends and familiars with the story of his trip to the Island of the Hermaphrodites. It is this narrator who will breathlessly recount the many scenes that

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<sup>49</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. My translations, for the most part quite literal, regrettably do not and cannot aspire to capture the stylistic complexity, playfulness, and nuance of the original French.



constitute our glimpse of the hermaphrodites' society. It is not until the conclusion of these descriptions that we arrive at the hermaphrodites' own views on social structures, language, ethics, and invention: the traveler/second narrator has transcribed an extract of the hermaphrodites' written laws. Artus's strategy of embedding narratives within narratives thus promptly renders it difficult to speak of the novel as a whole; each narrative voice speaks to a subtly different perspective on limits and the new, with the first narrator and the hermaphrodites representing opposing perspectives.

The traveler opens the story of his visit to the Island of the Hermaphrodites with a sentence of 32 lines. In these 32 lines, the traveler summarizes how, after an unspecified amount of time spent travelling, he came to arrive on the island: bored by his travels (55), he was on his way home when a storm caused him to shipwreck on the island. This opening sentence of 32 lines does more than relay background narration, however, for it also inaugurates, in particularly exaggerated form, a stylistic feature of the novel. Throughout the novel, the traveler will tend to speak at great length, postponing full breaks and adducing ever more detail in unending clauses and fragments.<sup>50</sup> When the traveler does begin a new sentence in these first few pages, he offers syntaxis rather than parataxis, language which both orients and connects: "Mais apres que... Lors... Toutesfois... Et comme... Toutesfois... Ainsi" 'But after... During... However... And as... However... Thus' (56-58). Thus does the traveler – in an early and formal representation of the extreme ambivalence that will characterize the novel as a whole (perhaps the only feature that could be said to characterize the

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<sup>50</sup> He shares this stylistic feature with the hermaphrodites' written laws.

novel as a whole) – offer a minimal experience of orientation even as he testifies quietly to a desire *not* to orient his listeners. In this way, his listeners’ experience will be similar to his own on the island, for, as he notes, at the end of the second sentence, “nous veismes que la terre sur laquelle nous marchions estoit toute flotante, et qu’elle erroit vagabonde sur ce grand Ocean sans aucune stabilité” ‘we saw that the land on which we were walking was floating freely, and that it was wandering vagabond on this great Ocean with no stability’ (56).

The sheer beauty of the island proves destabilizing as well: upon arrival, the traveler’s eye fails to comprehend the marvels of the place, for “l’architecture, la sculpture, et l’ordre que l’on y voyoit compassé en toutes ses parties, attiroit tellement l’esprit en admiration, que l’oeil, qui peut voir tant de choses en un instant, n’estoit pas assez suffisant pour comprendre tout le contenu de ce beau palais” ‘the architecture, the sculpture, and the order we saw there, studied [*compassé*] in all aspects, so attracted the spirit in admiration, that the eye, which can see so many things in an instant, was not enough to comprehend all the contents of that beautiful palace’ (57). From the beginning, there is something present which the narrator cannot entirely grasp, an admiration and attraction outside of comprehension and a visibility to which his eye, “qui peut voir tant de choses en un instant,” does not have access. The language with which the traveler describes the inassimilable indexes the scope of his unmooring: perplexingly, both the order (“l’architecture, la sculpture, et l’ordre,” figures of frame and structure), and the content (“le contenu de ce beau palais”), stretch out elusively, suggesting that even those conventional anchors of vision and knowledge – point and perspective, general and particular – collapse and

withdraw on the island, leaving the traveler quite literally unmoored. The traveler finds himself strangely “compassé” without coordinates, and that on an island which, moreover, floats, “vagabonde,” “sans aucune stabilité.”

Having discovered that “on l’appelloit l’isle des *Hermaphrodites*” ‘they called it the island of the *Hermaphrodites*’ (58), the traveler will go on to provide a rapturous ethnography of the many scenes he observes, beginning by following a group of people carrying plates for, he supposes, the “seigneur du lieu” ‘lord of the place’ (59).<sup>51</sup> This, it seems, will be his first encounter with either a hermaphrodite as such or with an elite one<sup>52</sup>; he has noted nothing in particular about the “merveilleusement grande multitude de gens qui alloient et venoient de tous costez” ‘marvelously great multitude of people coming and going from all sides’ (59), nor about the “quelques hommes” ‘few men’ (59) carrying food, so much dizzying background to the inside of the palace. This first encounter will instantly prove destabilizing in its own right, however, for the hands and face of the *seigneur du lieu* will momentarily, and somewhat horrifically, fail to materialize:

Je n’avois encore veu ce que c’estoit qui estoit dans ce lict, car on ne voyoit point encore les mains ny le visage; mais celuy qui luy avoit mis le manteau vint aussi tost luy lever un linge qui luy pendoit fort bas sur le visage, et à luy oster un masque qui n’estoit pas des estoffes ny de la forme de celuy que portent ordinairement les Dames, car il estoit comme d’une toile luisante et fort serrée, où il sembloit qu’on eust mis quelque gresse dessus, et si il ne se couvroit pas tout le visage, car il estoit eschancré en ondes devers le bas de peur que cela n’offençast la barbe qui commençoit à cotonner de tous costez (60).

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<sup>51</sup> Reeser identifies the “seigneur du lieu” as the king of the island (242).

<sup>52</sup> It is not clear to me how we are supposed to view the people serving the elites versus the elites themselves. Potentially they are all hermaphrodites, as it is the *island of hermaphrodites*, but the narrator only identifies certain individuals as hermaphrodites as such or in other cases as Seigneurs-Dames.

I had not yet seen what it was that was in this bed, for we did not yet see either the hands or the face; but the one who had put the coat on him came immediately to raise a fabric that hung low over his face and to remove from him a mask that was of neither the fabric nor the form of that ordinarily worn by Ladies, for it was as if of a glistening fabric and very tight where it seemed they must have put some fat underneath, and so it did not cover the whole face, for it was cut away in waves towards the bottom so that it would not offend the beard beginning to cotton from all sides.

In what turns into a detailed description of a mask, the narrator begins by remarking that he has not yet seen “ce que c’estoit qui estoit dans ce lict,” evidencing a will to mark the hermaphrodite as a foreign object, a “ce que” rather than a “ce qui.”

However, Artus promptly adds another twist to such objectifying logic by suggesting that “ce que c’estoit qui estoit dans ce lict” can be determined by a good look at “its” hands and face. As generally naked parts of the body to which an eye may turn in search of gender markers, the hands and face are indeed the more modest option for the obligatory gender check, but, in this case, the narrator already knows that the person in question (“he”<sup>53</sup>) is a hermaphrodite. In a sense, the person in the bed is thrown into question less because he is of an indeterminate gender than because he is of indeterminate hands and face: “on ne voyoit point encore les mains ny le visage.” These hands and face are, of course, gloved and masked: those serving the lord cover his face with a fabric that is like that of a glistening cloth, one which is inscrutably distinct from that normally worn by Ladies. This is a fabric which fails to fit into recognizable categories – it is *like* one thing, it is *not* another, it is not really (identified as) anything in particular. These coverings thus both elude classification themselves and somehow put into question – “ce que c’estoit” – the person they cover.

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<sup>53</sup> As Long notes, “... the hermaphrodite is actually designated by the pronoun *il*, even though he is called a ‘demi-femme’” (224).

In the rituals of beautification that the narrator proceeds to observe, he continues to encounter strange gaps, absences, and unidentifiable objects. In the room adjoining that of the hermaphrodite in the giant bed, he stumbles upon what appears to be a torture chamber: "... à peine fus-je entré dans la chambre, que je vy trois hommes que l'on tenoit aux cheveux avec de petites tenailles que l'on tiroit de certaines petites chaufferettes, de sorte que l'on voyoit leurs cheveux tous fumeux" 'I had barely entered the room when I saw three men being held by their hair with little pincers pulled from certain little heaters, such that we saw their hair all up in smoke' (61), which, the narrator notes, "m'effroya du commencement" 'frightened me at first' (61). As he notes, he "eu toutes les peines du monde à m'empescher de crier, pensant qu'on leur feist quelque outrage" 'had all the pains in the world stopping myself from crying out, thinking that they did them some outrage' (61), but from the precipice of a scene of apparent torture, based on the suspect combination of pincers and smoking heads of hair, he discovers that these three are getting perms: "quand je les euz considerez de plus prés, je recongneu qu'on ne peut faisoit point de mal" 'when I had regarded them more closely, I recognized that no one was doing them any harm' (61). From light self-mockery, the narrator shifts to teasing the hermaphrodites, explaining that there couldn't be anything outrageous afoot "Car l'un lisoit dans un livre, l'autre gaussoit avec un valet, et l'autre entretenoit un qui se disoit philosophe" 'For one was reading in a book, the other was laughing and mocking with a valet, and the other was speaking to one who called himself a philosopher' (61). Again, the narrator flirts with horror, suspended for a moment in the midst of something like a primal scene, "pensant qu'on leur feist quelque outrage"; thus too does the violence which the

narrator had left France to avoid return. He quickly recalibrates the scene laid out before him, such that it transforms into one of gentle comedy, but the residue of violence – the suggestion that we do not know what goes on with those “tenailles” and “chaufferettes” when the narrator leaves the room – is unsettling.

In addition to getting perms, the hermaphrodites are having their eyebrows waxed – “non toutefois si dextrement que cela ne feist beaucoup de douleur au pauvre patient” ‘not, however, so dexterously that it did not cause quite a lot of pain to the poor patient’ (62). Again, some residues of violence surface, guised in comedy. As the narrator watches on, the hermaphrodites’ cheeks, foreheads, and necks are rouged ruby-red and their lips are rubbed to rosy perfection. He explains how one hermaphrodite has his teeth brushed too: “je vis à l’instant un autre se mettre à genoux devant luy et le prenant à la barbe, luy faisoit baisser la machoire d’en bas, puis ayant mouillé le doigt dans je ne sçay quelle eau qu’il avoit là auprès de luy dans une petite escuelle de verre, il prit d’une certain poudre blanche, de laquelle il luy frotta les gencives et les dents” ‘I saw at that moment another go to his knees before him and, taking him by the beard, made him lower his jaw from below, then, having wet his finger in I don’t know what water that he had close to him in a little glass bowl, he took a certain white powder with which he rubbed his gums and teeth’ (62).<sup>54</sup> Once this anonymous figure has cleaned the hermaphrodite’s teeth, he fixes dentures in his mouth. Next someone dyes the hermaphrodite’s beard, “à peu près de la couleur de feu” ‘approximately the color of fire’ (63). The hermaphrodites are not only well

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<sup>54</sup> Teeth-cleaning here takes on remarkably erotic undertones.

turned out with their pommelled waves, ruby faces, and fiery beards: they are on the cutting edge of hygienic technology.

The threat of violence sensed by the narrator, hovering as optical illusion around the edges of these scenes of ritual and beautification, gathers momentum in the palace's décor. One of the beds, for instance, recounts Ovid's story of Caenis/Caenus, who, after being raped by Neptune, asks not to be a woman anymore so as to be safeguarded from "ever suffering / such injury again" (Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* 405). Artus does not relay the details of Caenis/Caenus's story, but readers of Ovid know that Caenis the woman became Caenus the man, and that Caenus's fate as a man would prove just as violent as had been his fate as a woman.<sup>55</sup> In the story of Caenis/Caenus, an act of violation leads to a desire for gender transformation; the gender transformation is a "mighty gift" and a "recompense": as Caenis states, "What I have endured / is so outrageous that I now must choose / some mighty gift as recompense: a thing / that will prevent my ever suffering / such injury again" (405). In the request, Caenis has already become Caenus: "The tone in which she uttered these last words / was deeper – such as suits a male; indeed, / she had become a man" (405). Gender transformation has similarly violent connotations in the tapestry the narrator regards next, where he sees represented scenes of the life of Heliogabalus. One of these scenes depicts Heliogabalus's third century sex-reassignment surgery: "je voyois ce mesme homme estendu tout nud sus une table, et plusieurs à l'entour de luy qui avoient diverses sortes de ferremens, et faisoient tout ce qui leur estoit possible

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<sup>55</sup> Neptune granted him a certain invincibility – that he could not be wounded or killed by blows or iron weaponry – but in the battle with the centaurs, Caenus would eventually be buried alive by the frustrated centaurs unable to kill him by means of their strength and weapons.

pour le faire devenir femme; mais à ce que j'en pouvois juger par la suite de l'histoire il demeroit du genre neutre" "I saw this same man stretched out entirely naked on a table, with many people surrounding him holding diverse sorts of medical instruments [*ferremens*] and doing all that they could to make him become a woman; but from what I could judge based on the rest of the story, he remained neuter" (73).

Heliogabalus, apparently reviled for various reasons both political and sexual, would be assassinated at the age of 18 and dragged through the streets of Rome. If Artus means to suggest that the hermaphrodites have, in their choice of décor, surrounded themselves with carefully selected myths and icons, Artus's narrative strategies seem no less motivated: the direct suggestion of gender transformation is left to the background, where it might hover as both a specter of violence and a horizon of possibility, a "mighty gift" both proceeded and followed by "sanglantes tragedies."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> These suggestions of violence seem to recall the very "sanglantes tragedies" the traveler had hoped to elude; but if that is the case, why, through the conduit of Caenis's mythical rape and Heliogabalus's ancient assassination, associate the violence of the Wars of Religion with gender transformation? Long points out that Artus writes against the backdrop of not only the Wars of Religion but the rise of skeptical ideals in Renaissance France, and she finds a correlation between the diffusion of understandings of gender, the Reformation, and the reintroduction of skepticism into Western thought. Skepticism, as Richard Popkin points out, through a historical accident, was re-introduced into Western thought at the same time as the Reformation (xvi); perhaps even more strikingly, it was in 1562 that Henri Estienne published a Latin edition of Sextus Empiricus's *Hypotyposes* (Popkin 19), the year of the Massacre of Vassy, conventionally marked as the start of France's Wars of Religion. According to Long, Artus "cleverly makes his hermaphrodites 'embody'" (220) various skeptical theorems: "First, the hermaphrodites are only the appearance of human beings, recognizable only by speech, costume, gesture, and the laws they create – all socially dictated, that is appearance-oriented and performative, aspects of identity. They also embody the suspension of judgment, in that they are neither male nor female (also not entirely French or alien, nor entirely fact or fiction)" (220). These, as Long points out, constitute menacing perspectives on truth, religion, bodies, and customs: ["w]hat seems to menace dogmatically ordered French society is the acceptance that there may be more than one perspective on any issue. Acceptance of Protestantism puts the 'truth' of Catholicism into doubt – two religious truths cannot exist at one and the same time. If one tolerates the existence of both, one achieves only suspension of judgment... Similarly, given the coexistence of two sexes in one person, the notion of one sex as the 'true' sex is canceled out... Without any foundational truth, the subject is left only with appearances by which to judge sexes" (220).



In each scene of ritual and beautification he describes, the narrator's attention is fixed on appearances: more specifically, he attends to "the cultural signs of gender – clothing, gesture, language, public behavior – rather than bodily marks of sex or reproductive questions" (Long 216). For this reason, the bodies of the *Isle* figure not in marks of what we might call "genital difference" but in the interstices of tapestries of objects – clothes, gestures, language, architecture, even origami, pastries, ritual. The hermaphrodites play with the coverings of the body to such an extent that the "body itself" seems to disappear altogether or to materialize precisely as covering, prosthetic, and technology; thus does Artus "question normative views of sex... without restoring any solid epistemological grounding" (Long 216).<sup>57</sup> The retreating, indeterminate, and all but absent hermaphroditic body at the center of the narrative contributes to the unmoored and unmooring quality of the text and could be read as one of the ways in which violence itself, in the guise of a disturbing suggestion or skeptical argument, makes its uncanny return: there may be no *there* there, or, in skeptical terms, "trying to know real being is like trying to clutch water" (Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Spinoza* 52).

In his depiction of the objects of the hermaphrodites' island, Artus lavishes particular attention on objects which serve as coverings. In several such scenes, as the traveler's eyes fail again and again to comprehend, the coverings encountered frighten him, such that the novel vacillates rapidly between moments of comedy and horror. In the midst of this humor and horror, Artus points to the ways in which the hermaphrodites' objects and rituals flirt with the uncomfortable doubles of absence

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<sup>57</sup> As Long explains, skepticism "argues against the efficacy of language" (219) to posit any solid epistemological ground. See for reference Book Two of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

and prosthesis, loss and substitute, hole and covering; these are pairings which hold a particular status in psychoanalytic thought, where the “term for the process of creating a visible substitute for something perceived as missing is fetishism” (Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy* 145). Fetishism is not only aesthetic or architectural, though, as we have seen in the hermaphrodites’ masks, gloves, and fake teeth, but also a “feat of the imagination” (Dean 149) and a “creative strategy” (149) that bestows value upon acts or objects which have no such inherent value. Fetishism, in other words, is political. According to Dean,

When an ordinary or devalued object – one thinks, for example, of a used jockstrap or dirty underwear – is transvalued and made precious, we glimpse the extraordinary power of fetishism to destabilize cultural hierarchies. Although plenty of fetishes are predictable (big cocks, big breasts), not every case of fetishistic transformation is as trivial as the example of used underwear. Predictable fetishes are overdetermined by reigning cultural values, whereas less-predictable instances point to the cultural underdetermination of certain fantasies – and hence to the possibilities of erotic creativity (149).

The hermaphrodites very self-consciously compel themselves to the outer boundaries of disgust and acceptability in the case of food, and specifically foreign food or foods which are “tout estrangeres” (Artus 145). In their fidelity to creativity and feats of the imagination, the hermaphrodites acknowledge that they must open their “tastes” to things which they actually do not like:

... mon interprete me dict que ce n'estoit que par curiosité, et qu'en ce pays c'est la coustume de faire fort grand cas des choses nouvelles..., de sorte qu'ils mangeoient bien souvent des choses qui estoient du tout contraires à leur goust. Mais si elles estoient nouvelles, et sur tout estrangeres, pour faire plaisir à la coustume, ils en forçoient d'en user, et en faisoient grand cas en public (145).

My interpreter told me that this was only out of curiosity and that in this country it is the custom to make a great spectacle of new things..., such that they ate quite often things which were entirely contrary to their taste. But if they were new, and above all foreign, in order to satisfy the custom, they

would force themselves to try them and to make a big thing of doing so in public.

The “pâtisseries” that the narrator observes the hermaphrodites eating – which are “tout contraires à leur goust” – have been given “des noms d’alchimie, comme excitation, erection, projection, multiplication, et autres noms signifians la vertu...” ‘alchemical names, like excitement, erection, discharge, multiplication, and other names signifying virtue...’ (145-146).<sup>58</sup> The maxim here depends on expanding the zone of what is acceptable to the culture, forcing through the disgust at the boundaries to encounter those new, foreign, and not entirely tasty pastries which are then rewarded with culturally valorized names like arousal, erection, discharge, and proliferation. The narrator, of course, is tongue in cheek again, implicitly suggesting that another of the marvels of the island is that, for the hermaphrodites, words like erection and discharge signify virtue and cleanliness – the expectation being that all of “nos François” must know that these are dirty names for dirty things. The hermaphrodites recalibrate these foreign pastries by associating them with acts which they honor, for “[p]erverse desire pushes back the boundaries, claiming ground from disgust” (Jonathon Dollimore 378). Since disgust functions in part to shore up the borders of either an individual’s or a culture’s subjectivity (according to Jonathon Dollimore, “[d]isgust is typically experienced at the boundary of a culture” [368])), to push past such margins entails a threat to coherence or integrity. The hermaphrodites valorize such permeability as virtuous.

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<sup>58</sup> For an expansive study of the associations between alchemy and hermaphrodites, see Leah DeVun, “The Jesus Hermaphrodite.”

The hermaphrodites' valorizations of different foods, fabrics, styles, and words exemplify the transvaluation of objects that have no inherent value and of objects that have been negatively valued by other cultural paradigms; however, the hermaphrodites' feats of imagination go even further than the act of making precious particular types of undervalued objects: they also make precious inconstant, unstable, elusive objects as such, objects which surface only to recede, slipping from grasp. The hermaphrodites' objects are always – sometimes quite literally – slipping away from them. For example, in the morning toiletry rituals, the narrator notes that some of the men standing around the hermaphrodites are undoing the work of their compatriots, and that the hermaphrodites watch on in mirrors as this counter-productivity takes place: “Chacun d’eux avoit plusieurs hommes à l’entour de la chaise où ils estoient assis, l’un defaisant ce que l’autre avoit faict, l’autre tenant en ses mains un grand miroir” ‘Each one of them had several men around the chair where they were seated, the one undoing what the other had done, the other holding in his hands a large mirror’ (61). Such instabilities manifest even more literally in their pavement, their chairs, and their postures. The narrator mentions that “le pavement estoit si luisant et si glissant qu’à peine s’y pouvoit on tenir” ‘the pavement was so shining and so slippery that they could barely hold themselves upright on it’ (58). And watching one of the hermaphrodites walk, the narrator declares, “lors commença à se remuer de luy-mesme, car jusques alors il n’avoit eu mouvement que par l’ayde d’autruy; mais il bransloit tellement le corps, la teste et les jambes que je croyais à tous propos qu’il deust tomber de son long. J’avois opinion que cela leur arrivoit, à cause de l’instabilité de l’isle, mais j’y appris depuis que c’est à cause qu’ils trouvent ceste façon la plus

belle que pas une autre” ‘then he began to move himself of his own accord, for up until that point he had only moved with the help of others; but he so wobbled his body, head, and legs that I believed at any moment he might fall flat on his face. I was of the opinion that this happened to them because of the instability of the island, but I have since learned that it is because they find this fashion of walking the most beautiful of all’ (68). Finally, the hermaphrodites have invented chairs to correspond to what they find “plus belle que pas une autre” (77), chairs which will permit them to maintain a state of perpetual movement even when seated: “Il y avoit là dedans plusieurs chaires brisées qui s’allongoient, s’eslargissoient, se baissoient, et se haussoient par ressorts, ainsi qu’on vouloit. C’estoit une invention *Hermaphrodique* nouvellement trouvée en ce pays-là...” ‘Inside there were several broken chairs which, with springs, could get longer, bigger, lower, and higher, as one wished. It was a *Hermaphroditic* invention newly found in that country...’ (77).

The hermaphrodites’ creative feats of the imagination stretch into the realm of language as well. This is already evident in the scene with the pastries, where the hermaphrodites contest and reconfigure the oftentimes pejorative senses of words such as *excitation*, *erection*, *projection*, and *multiplication*, indicating them as words which signify virtue. The reconfiguration is mutual: these terms are displaced from the realm of the pejorative, and virtue itself becomes, happily, associated with the sexual. The hermaphrodites address the matter of language directly, though, in a section of their laws titled “POUR CE QUI CONCERNE L’ENTREAGENT” ‘FOR THAT WHICH CONCERNS SOCIALIZING’ (112). In this cult of appearances, the guiding principle is, predictably, deception in the service of profit (112). Beyond deception, however,

lies a universe of signifying potentiality, where “[t]ous ceux des nôtres” ‘all of our kind’ (112) would possess unbridled tongues, and where a good word would be worth more than a good friend: “Leur langue sera comme le ressort d’une horloge qu’on a desbandé, elle ne pourra s’arrêter tant qu’ils ayent devidé tout ce qu’ils auront envie de dire, et chacun permettra à son compagnon de parler le moins qu’il pourra, quand ce ne seroit que pour estouffer sa gloire, et empescher sa reputation” ‘Their tongue [*langue*] will be like the spring of a clock that has been loosened [*desbandé*], it will not be able to stop itself for as long as they have poured out all that they will want to say, and each one will allow his companion to speak as little as possible, whenever this would be only to stifle his glory and prevent his reputation’ (113). “Nos plus loyaux subjects et vrais *Hermaphrodites*” ‘Our most loyal subjects and true *Hermaphrodites*’ (114) should ideally be all but unable to shut up, so long as that excited cacophony of words serve to stifle another’s expression; likewise, “Sur tout nous conseillons aux nôtres de perdre plustost un bon amy qu’un bon mot” ‘Above all, we advise our [citizens] to lose a good friend before a good word’ (113). “Un bon mot” might be an invented one, so long as it be sweet in sound and, normally, possess two meanings: “l’une représentant à la lettre ce qu’ils auront envie de dire, l’autre un sens mystique de voluptez, qui ne sera entendu que de leurs semblables...” ‘the one representing to the letter that which they will want to say, the other a mystical sense of sensuality, which will only be understood by others like them/others of their own kind...’ (114-115). Indeed, whole languages should be invented toward subversive ends, “soit pour l’amour, soit pour l’Estat” ‘either for love, or for the State’: “nous leur avons permis et permettons d’avoir dès maintenant et à tousjours quelque langue ou

jargon composé à leur fantaisie qu'ils nommeront de quelque nom estrange, comme Mesopotamique, Pantagruelique, et autres" 'we have permitted them and will continue to permit them now and forever to have some language or jargon composed at their whim which they will name by some strange name like Mesopotamian, Pantagruelian, and others' (115).

As in all things, the hermaphrodites take evident pleasure in the savor, invention, subversive potentiality, and quick abandonment of a word, and their laws testify to a will to signify without end, but in such a way as to be comprehensible to a small community of initiates, "leurs semblables." There could be no confidence in such a community, though, given that at any moment, a particularly poetic and enterprising member may call upon or invent "un bon mot" worth more than a friend. The hermaphrodites are aware that their advocacy of subterfuge and violence renders each one of them vulnerable – in fact they are proud of it. As they state in the opening paragraph of their laws on "entregent," "Tous ceux des nostres... porteront sur le front une medalle qu'on appelle impudence, et sur le revers l'effronterie, à fin que cela puisse enseigner à tous les peuples qu'ils sont capables de faire et de souffrir toutes sortes d'affronts" 'All of our kind... will wear in front a medal that we call impudence, and on the back effrontery, such that that might teach all peoples that they are capable of doing and of suffering all sorts of affronts'(112). Advertizing that they are capable of committing *and* enduring all manners of affronts, the hermaphrodites suggest that they are both willing to affront all limits and capable of surviving any attack, that they are, thus, without limit.

Artus and the hermaphrodites overlap in their projects, if at fleeting moments, in demonstrating how “[w]hen an ordinary or devalued object ... is transvalued and made precious, we glimpse the extraordinary power of fetishism to destabilize cultural hierarchies” (Dean 149). If, as Dubois relays in his introduction to the novel, hermaphroditism was associated with inconstancy at the time, and inconstancy signified deception and Machiavellianism (9), Artus adds to these apparent vilifications the erotic and aesthetic elements of inconstancy. If only in spite of itself, Artus’s novel is its own feat of the imagination, transvaluing those sorts of bodies which were often virulently devalued in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. He thus – if only in a small way – practices what one could call a fetishistic ethics at the same time as he populates an island full of aesthetes who do the same. A fetishistic ethics involves openness to the boundaries of disgust; it may make precious the revolting object or body; it flirts with the horrifying and mitigates those necessary losses via creative engagements with object production and object loss. But it is not utopian. As Dean writes, “Trying to make fantasy conform to political dictates, no matter how progressive the political principles involved, is misguided and dangerous – misguided because the unconscious remains definitely uneducable and dangerous because such an Orwellian project smacks of thought control and censorship” (160). By contrast, the hermaphrodites confront lack, and attempt to mitigate it, with the refrain “chacun selon sa fantaisie” ‘each according to his whim [*fantaisie*]’ (143).

Limits, however, keep emerging; as I noted earlier, the proliferation of possibility depends just as surely on encounters with limits, and in their “ARTICLES DE FOY” ‘ARTICLES OF FAITH’ (89), the hermaphrodites attempt to grapple with



loss and its mitigations by means of the signifier itself. Each of the eight articles begins with the words “*Nous ignorons.*” The verb *ignorer* can signify either “not to know anything about” or “to ignore,” such that the verb testifies to the structure of disavowal in simultaneously positing an object (as ignored, as unknown) and denying it. The hermaphrodites declare they do not know anything about more familiar religious tenets: for example, “*Nous ignorons une providence superieure aux choses humaines...*” ‘We know nothing of a providence super to human things’ (89). After positing what they do not know anything about, they assert what they believe instead, or they may qualify the disavowed thing – the more familiar religious tenet – by adding a twist: “*Nous ignorons tout autre paradis que la volupté temporelle*” ‘We know no other paradise than that of temporal sensuality’ (89). Their faith is in a temporal and limited universe, devoid of god and thereby lacking the repair of an organizing divinity. They assert, “*Nous ignorons toute autre vie que la presente, et croyons qu’apres icelle tout est mort pous nous. C’est pourquoy nous nous efforçons jusqu’au dernier jour à nous donner tout le plaisir que nous nous pouvons imaginer*” ‘We know nothing of any other life than that of the present, and we believe that after here, all is dead for us. This is why we strive until the last day to give ourselves all the pleasure that we might possibly imagine’ (89). Death animates their faith, but in the strong sense, for it is not a death which promises eternal life, but a death that signifies finality, erasure, a death which, in life, compels them to force themselves to give themselves all the pleasure they can possibly imagine. By declaring “*et croyons qu’apres icelle tout est mort pour nous,*” they lodge faith in death at the center of “*icelle.*” What they believe in, in other words, is death. What they ignore or do not

know anything about is anything that would limit or attenuate death. In this way, the violence perceived by the narrator, which seems to have followed him from France to the New World to this island, finds form and a secure resting place in – of all places – the hermaphrodites’ anti-*Decalogue*.

But perhaps the most compelling limit represented by the novel would be that the hermaphrodites encounter in their relations with one another. According to the hermaphrodites, part of living “à sa fantaisie” requires a systematic undermining of the notion of the stable or faithful tie as such. They are keen to demonstrate that structures like kinship, contract, filiation, and marriage furnish only fantasmatic bonds, bonds which wish to mask or attenuate the absence of reciprocity between subjects. In their written laws, they assert again and again that the referents upon which groups have tended to rely in defining or securing kinship – such as marriage or patrilinearity – are without foundation. Instead of upholding the value of such institutions as marriage or patrilinearity, the hermaphrodites point inextricably to the fantasmatic character of such institutions and the fact that such institutions do not – cannot – ultimately guarantee anything.

If the hermaphrodites replace the ties they dismantle with some other form of tie, it would seem to be that of the broken tie – the tie as broken, or breakable, or made to be broken, or the promiscuous, vagabond tie: this last description of their ties has the advantage of making reference to the narrator’s description of the island itself as “toute flotante... erroit vagabonde sur ce grand Ocean sans aucune stabilité” (56). While the hermaphrodites’ aesthetics celebrate elusiveness and instability, movement, ruse, disguise, invention, creation, and wobbliness, this aesthetics may also open onto

an ethics. For in insisting upon the constant proliferation of ever new objects which must by their “nature” ever slip away, the novel suggests that the hermaphrodites expose themselves to loss to an almost absurd degree; for the hermaphrodites, there is no securing of either objects or other, and they make an ethic out of the continual exposure of, and to, that limit.

## CHAPTER 5

### Beyond the Grammar of the Norm: Transgender Subjectivity and the Limit(s) of Sexual Difference

#### **Introduction**

Psychoanalytic thinkers tend to be fond of limits: “I begin with the limit” (3), Jacques Lacan states in *Seminar XX, Encore*; “jouissance is a limit” (92); “the limit ... is constituted by the fact that there are beings who speak” (139); “Our path, that of analytic discourse, progresses only due to this narrow limit” (2). In those regions where the fields of gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis have met since Lacan, this limit figures in various places as the limit of sexual difference; yet the “limits” different authors have in mind are rarely commensurate. For some, the limit turns out to be normative: this seems to be at least part of Judith Butler’s critique of Lacan’s paradigm of sexual difference, as Butler argues that certain constraints function as limits to the kinds of sexed beings we might become (*Bodies That Matter* 96). In Butler’s reading, subjects are, in a sense, terrorized into those becomings: “the Lacanian scheme presumes that the terror over occupying either of these positions [the feminized fag and the phallicized dyke] is what compels the assumption of a sexed position within language” (96). (This word “terror,” in fact, returns us to one of the polemics which opened this project: gender theorist Kate Bornstein’s identification of Lacanian analyst Catherine Millot as a “[g]ender terrorist ... [a] Gender Defender[ ]” [236].) For others, the limit of sexual difference is organic: there is a sort of “genital difference” (Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body* 151) either to be ultimately upheld or

deconstructed. I have in mind here gender theorist Gayle Salamon's critiques of feminist writers Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, and Biddy Martin in "Sexual Indifference and the Problem of the Limit," an article to which this chapter is very much indebted. Sometimes, too, the "normative" and the "organic" are of a piece with one another: psychologist Suzanne J. Kessler's work on the medical management of "intersex" ("for lack of a better word," to quote the title of Thea Hillman's memoir) people, for example, reveals the extent to which social views on the "organ" inform medical practice and (re)produce normative genitals (*Lessons from the Intersexed*). Similarly – but from within a different idiom and toward a different end – psychoanalyst Geneviève Morel speaks of "natural, anatomical difference" as "a mythical real," one which only "acquires its value ... when interpreted" ("Psychoanalytical Anatomy" 30).

For Lacan, though, the limit of sexual difference is logical. To my knowledge, Lacan does not anywhere use the phrase "the limit of sexual difference," but he does speak extensively of limits and logic in the seminar which is aptly titled *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Approaching sexual difference as "the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question – something that resists every attempt at its symbolization" (Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference" 61), Lacan tries to formalize that impasse through the writing of the formulas of sexuation, explaining, in rather hesitant terms, "That is why I thought I could provide a model of it [the real] using mathematical formalization, inasmuch as it is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness" (93). In addition to the "models" afforded by mathematical formalization, Lacan turns to poetry to attempt to write something of the

limit of sexual difference, speaking of “the textual work that comes out of the spider’s belly, its web” (93). As he notes, “It is a truly miraculous function to see, on the very surface emerging from an opaque point of this strange being, the trace of these writings taking form, in which one can grasp the limits, impasses, and dead ends that show the real acceding to the symbolic” (93). Both logic and the spider’s belly provide a strange sort of ground for the writing of the impasse that is sexual difference; both constitute instances of “the real acceding to the symbolic,” and what this looks like – or feels like (“one can grasp”) – is a limit, impasse, or dead end. But what is that logical impasse? Why is this what sexual difference is? And how does the transgender subjectivity of interest to this project relate to it?

In the pages to follow, I would like to consider a set of gender studies and psychoanalytic texts where the limit of sexual difference is at issue. I am drawn to the question of the limit not only for its currency in debates on sexual difference, but for the ways in which the limit might be thought with respect to transgender subjectivity and embodiment. Sometimes the various forms the limit of sexual difference may take – normative, organic, logical, or otherwise – slip, and my hunch is that this slippage can be found particularly in those moments when authors are dealing, whether implicitly or explicitly, with transgender subjectivity and transgender and gender non-normative embodiment. While in some cases this slippage is expressly at issue, intended and illuminating – as in the Kessler example cited above, which, to be clear, does not dialogue with psychoanalysis at all – , in other cases, such a slippage is problematic. Above all, to my mind, it is problematic in psychoanalytic texts themselves, namely, at the point at which the *logical* limit of sexual difference lapses

into a *normative* or *organic* one. This, of course, seems to be Butler's critique of the Lacanian scheme in general, in the sense that she does not read it as anything other than normative; but, as I have tried to show in Chapter One and will revisit here, such a slippage belies the understanding of sexual difference outlined in Lacan's *Seminar XX, Encore* formulas of sexuation – and psychoanalytic thinkers would most likely be the first to say so again.

To those who have turned to transgender subjectivity as the exemplum of a liberatory transgression which proves the point of the instability or potential limitlessness of (the terms of) sexual difference, and to those who have critiqued transgender subjectivity for just that; to those who have eschewed transgender subjectivity altogether; and to those who have turned to it as the “impossibility” which proves the point of the limit of sexual difference, I propose that the form of transgender subjectivity of interest to this project, which Lacan might call “feminine,” constitutes a very particular experience of the limit. Could transgender subjectivity allow us to think the limit of sexual difference as a moving target, one whose dominion over subjects would take different forms? By this account, what would be unmoving – what would not “budge,” to call on Joan Copjec's formulation (*Read My Desire* 211) – would be that there is a limit as such, meaning, for every subject. Subjects may wish, in a normative enterprise, to impose limits on other subjects, and some may use the language of sexual difference to do so, asserting that subjects are “men” or “women” and nothing other. This move, though, makes of sexual difference something which “vulgariz[es]” (Copjec, “The Fable of the Stork and Other False Sexual Theories” 67) and “visualize[es]” (67) the “unanswerable question of being”

(68). In a richer sense, one which does not aspire to offer the grammar of a norm, sexual difference is a language for thinking about how subjects position themselves with respect *to* the limit, specifically, their own limits.

### **I. The Organic, the Normative, the Logical, and “the Common Error”**

When Lacan narrates the formulas in *Seminar XX, Encore*, he does not speak of transpeople. He makes clear at this point in his theorizations of sexual difference that unconscious sexuation does not have to do with gender identification: “one is not obliged, when one is male, to situate oneself on the side of [the masculine]. One can also situate oneself on the side of the not-whole... Despite – I won’t say their phallus – despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond” (76). As Lacan indicates here, unconscious sexuation is not determinate of gender but has rather to do with modes of jouissance. In his narrations of the formulas, Lacan speaks of “men” and “women” without clarifying whether or not any of these men and women might be trans; gender non-normativity, in whatever its form, is perhaps not much on his mind in this seminar. When he does throughout the years speak explicitly of transpeople, a fairly rare occurrence throughout his oeuvre, his language is fragmentary instead of synthetic<sup>59</sup>; there is not really, in other words, anything like a Lacanian theory of transgender. There are records of a couple cases, brief asides that are generally none too inspiring, and references that have to do with the case of Schreber (and to my knowledge, Lacan does not anywhere identify Schreber as the exemplum of transsexuality as such).

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<sup>59</sup> To be fair, this is his overall pedagogic approach.



Various Lacanians have attempted to fill that gap, taking up Lacan's fragmentary evidence and, in some cases, their own clinical experience in hopes of offering something more synthetic on transsexuality and transgender. Perhaps the most famous among these attempts in the U.S. context is Catherine Millot's *Horsexe*; Millot makes a number of interesting points about Lacanian concepts, but the claims she makes about "the transsexual" are incredibly generalizing, as for example when she relays (without sign of critique) the views of Janice Raymond: "Transsexuals' image of women is wholly conformist, and holds no hope of salvation outside the polar extremes of their sexual identification scale: the star and the housewife" [14]). Millot's claims are also pathologizing – at least, they are to the extent that we are meant to understand mechanisms like identifying "outsidesex" (135) and choosing "not to leave open the question of his desire" (142) as ones that psychoanalysis would frown upon. (Recall that Lacan's proposes that, "from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" [*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 319]). The least pathologizing and, for this reason and others, most promising Lacanian text on transsexuality and transgender is Patricia Gherovici's *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism*; Gherovici notes that "Millot's claims may need some updating" (12).

Morel includes a brief note on transsexuality in an article dealing with what she refers to as psychoanalytical anatomy. Her objective is to explain how it is that "[f]or psychoanalysis, sexual difference is not a question of anatomy" ("Psychoanalytical Anatomy" 28), and her article is useful because it outlines a

schema which disentangles three temporal registers of sexuation, registers which more or less map onto the three kinds of “limits” I mentioned above: the organic, the normative, and the logical. Morel identifies the first register as “that of natural, anatomical difference,” noting that, “[i]n the old days, this used to be marked at birth, but the genotype is now mostly predicted using ultrasound” (30). Morel qualifies this so-called natural, anatomical difference, however, stating that it “is a mythical real, inasmuch as it acquires its value only from the second phase” (30). The second register, the normative one, “is that of sexual discourse” (30). Here, “nature” is subject to interpretation; “‘one’ distinguishes ‘it’ as being a boy or a girl. ‘One’ here means the family, the doctor, and so on...” (30). The sexual discourse is the site of the propagation of what “Lacan calls the ‘common error,’ common because it is everybody’s and because it creates a community...” (30). The “common error” “changes the status of the phallus. The phallus is the signified of *jouissance* ..., but sexual discourse makes it a signifier” (30). The third register, then, the logical one, is that of sexuation (31), where to be “sexed” means to be “all” or “not-all” inscribed in the phallic function.

Morel’s schema shares some features with something one might find in a feminist essay on gender: the “natural organ” is de-naturalized and demystified; it becomes significant only when it becomes signifying, and the ways in which it is signifying constitute an error. Gherovici words it quite nicely: “It is true that the phallus, often confused with the limp little prick, is not much more than a signified of *jouissance* that sexual discourse transforms into a signifier” (195). It is the “common error,” writes Morel, which “changes the status of the phallus. The phallus is the

signified of *jouissance* ..., but sexual discourse makes it a signifier” (30). In outlining the sense of the common error, Morel is drawing from Lacan’s nineteenth seminar, ...*Ou pire*, where Lacan observes that “rather early on, earlier than one might expect, these individuals [girls and boys] are distinguished from one another” (17). They are distinguished on the basis of the value taken on (18) by that “fameuse ‘petite différence’” (17). This value is not inherent to the “petite difference”; it takes on value through the “function of criteria that are formed depending on language...” (##), such that “the judgment of recognition of the surrounding adults is based then on an error...” (17-18). For “[a]n organ is only an instrument through the mediation of something by which every instrument is grounded. The fact is that it is a signifier” (18). Norms, in other words, dictate the reading of the body; recognition springs from the “function of criteria that are formed depending on language.” Morel outlines what the organ-become-signifier henceforth signifies in “the sexual discourse”: “‘Boy’ no longer means simply that it has a penis, but that it is capable of virility, of being a man, as one says. ‘Girl’ loses its anatomical meaning to become simultaneously a synonym of privation and defect and also of femininity... The natural organ has become an *organon*, a signifying instrument” (30).

In part this is all familiar. Lacan and Morel are pointing to the discursive register of the body, to gender norms and roles. But, at the point at which we shift from the second to the third register of sexualization, or from a normative to a logical understanding of sexual difference, much hinges on how we understand the phallus, the phallic function, and the common error, for the concept of the phallic function carries over. What, after all, do the norms articulated in the sexual discourse have to

do with unconscious sexuation? It seems to me that it is in the space between the second and the third registers schematized by Morel that disputes easily, and understandably, arise between gender theorists and Lacanians – for example, when Butler laments the “tacit cruelties” of norms and calls for “a kinder, gentler psychoanalytic theory” (*Bodies That Matter* 115), or when Copjec retorts, “Sex does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so” (*Read My Desire* 211). This space is a reminder that, on a certain level, gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis are concerned with fundamentally different subjects: in the last instance, gender studies is interested in the subject who acts and is acted upon on the social scene, while Lacanian psychoanalysis is interested in the subject of the unconscious. That being said, part of the intent of this project is to find places where, nonetheless, the two discourses cannot do without each other, and the blurry space between the second and third registers of sexuation is, I think, just one such site. Gender studies can here remind psychoanalysis of the degree to which the latter imports, or runs the risk of importing, concepts from the terrain of “the sexual discourse” into the terrain of the ostensibly “logical,” and psychoanalysis can remind gender studies that, no matter how far we might go in adapting the sexual discourse to the changing desires of its inhabitants, ultimately, “the body will never find in language a harmonious home” (Gherovici 212).

What, then, is the phallus? Lacan’s definition in “The Signification of the Phallus” arrives as he is explaining why it is that “man cannot aim at being whole”: “man cannot aim at being whole ... once the play of displacement and condensation to which he is destined in the exercise of his functions marks his relation, as a subject, to

the signifier. / The phallus is the privileged signifier of this mark in which the role [part] of Logos is wedded to the advent of desire” (581). The phallus for Lacan, in other words, is the signifier of a mark, that where the subject suffers a loss/is instituted as desiring because of the fact of language. Perhaps the simplest and most capacious definition available, though – and thus one of the most useful ones to this project –, is Renata Salecl’s: the phallus is the signifier of the subject’s lack in being (“Introduction” 6).

When Morel speaks, following Lacan, of the “common error,” she is surely right: “One” does say that “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl”; and when she adds that the common error has something to do with the community, she is surely right again: being subject to this pronouncement is indeed quite generally how one enters the community in these places. It’s important to bear in mind that Morel’s words here are descriptive, not prescriptive. What she does not address in this descriptive mode, of course, are the constricting effects of the sexual discourse. After all, why would this – a gender binary interpreted and reproduced through a dimorphic reading of genitalia, of “la fameuse ‘petite différence’” – be the criterion for the creation of a community? Is Morel suggesting that there would be a certain necessity to safeguarding the common error in this particular way, such that the creation of community depends on not only sharing the error, but on sharing the error as it is? But error must be something which can change, correct? After all, this is the realm of discourse. Morel’s words are brief here and these questions are neither raised nor answered.

While Morel does not suggest that the common error may change in any way, she does indicate that “the subject can accept or refuse the common error of sexual

discourse” (31), thereby indicating that some might find it objectionable. But, according to Morel, “[i]f he (or she) refuses it, the result is psychosis, or outside-discourse, and he will have to invent an untried sexuation” (31). According to Morel, “transsexuals” are such people. Under the heading of “Transsexuality,” Morel writes, “If we place ourselves in the second phase of sexuation, we can see that these subjects refuse the sexual discourse” (33) such that “we are not dealing with an error of nature here but rather with a refusal on the order of foreclosure, of sexual discourse, and of the common error which it implies: turning the phallus into the signifier of sex” (33-34). Simply put, for Morel, those with non-normative gender expressions – those she would group under the name “transsexual” – are psychotic or outside-discourse because they refuse to turn the phallus into the signifier of sex.

Morel’s move here is both problematic and confusing.<sup>60</sup> In the first place: while “the sexual discourse” does predominantly regard transsexual, transgender, and gender non-normative people as, yes, non-normative, meaning outside the norm, it is highly problematic simply to lump together gender non-normativity and the structure of psychosis. Psychosis is a very particular structure, one wherein subjects maintain very particular relationships to language, and it is far from clear that gender non-

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<sup>60</sup> In addition to the reasons I outline in the body of the chapter, her move is confusing and problematic in its apparent deviation from how Lacan himself presents the matter in the seminar to which she is referring. I read Lacan’s words on transsexuality and the common error to be suggesting that transsexuals participate in the common error rather than reject it: “An organ is only an instrument through the mediation of something by which every instrument is grounded. The fact is that it is a signifier. So then! It is as signifier that the transsexual no longer wants it and not as an organ. And in this he suffers from an error, which is precisely the common error. The passion of the transsexual is the madness of wanting to free himself from this error, the common error which does not see that the signifier is enjoyment, and that the phallus is only its signified. The transsexual no longer wants to be signified as phallus by sexual discourse, which, as I state, is impossible. He is only making one mistake, which is to want to force this sexual discourse which *qua* impossible is the passage of the Real, to want to force it by means of surgery” (18-19). However, Morel significantly develops these ideas in a more trans-friendly direction in two other pieces: see “The Sexual Sinthome” and *Sexual Ambiguities*.

normativity as such would necessarily have anything to do with, for example, the way in which language that has been foreclosed returns in the real. As Lacan writes, “What is the psychotic phenomenon? It is the emergence in reality of an enormous meaning that has the appearance of being nothing at all – in so far as it cannot be tied to anything, since it has never entered into the system of symbolization – but under certain conditions it can threaten the entire edifice” (*Seminar III* 85).

Morel’s move is also confusing: for aren’t those who refuse to turn the phallus into the signifier of sex (for Morel, “transsexuals”), in a sense, closer to psychoanalysis – which is the discourse which states that the phallus is not the signifier of sex but a signifier of the subject’s lack in being, the signifier of a mark of loss? Might there not in fact be a certain affiliation between those who refuse the common error and the truths to which psychoanalysis attests? There may or may not be a pathologizing gesture in the appellation of “psychotic” for Morel (one might feel sure that there is, but all of the four structures Lacan describes may take either pathological or non-pathological form), but one wonders if “analysts” too are psychotic, and one imagines not.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike Morel, Gherovici draws attention to the possible affiliation between the insights of those who reject the common error and the insights of psychoanalysis in her framing of the common error. Discussing two case studies (Henri, analyzed by Lacan, and Schreber, discussed by Freud and Lacan but analyzed by neither), Gherovici writes:

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<sup>61</sup> I overstate the case here to point to the absurdity of generalizing in such ways about any group of people.

Their transformation into women was the consequence of not being able to make a common ‘error,’ which is that of taking a natural organ for an *organon*, a system of principles, an organizer. This common error can be what the rectification proposed by some transsexuals is all about: ‘If you think that because I have a penis I am a man, that is an error; I can be a woman who has a penis.’ Or conversely, ‘If you think that not having a penis makes me a woman, this is an error because I am a man without a penis.’ And, they are absolutely right because for the unconscious somebody with a penis can be a woman or someone without a penis can be a man. Sexual positioning is not based on organ attribution (165-166).

Gherovici’s approach is quite different from Morel’s, even though she is drawing on Morel’s work and speaking to the same concepts. Gherovici is responding to specific cases, cases which she has, prior to this paragraph, spent some time detailing. The benefit of this approach is that she is not obliged to speak in generalizations. Neither does she extrapolate from these two cases to make assertions about “transsexuals as such” or “the transsexual”; instead, she writes, “This common error *can be* what the rectification proposed by *some* transsexuals is all about” (emphasis added).

We see in these two treatments that the “common error” of the second register of sexuation is invoked with respect to transgender subjectivity in psychoanalytic literature to paradoxical effect: to assert that transgender subjects over-invest in the common error, or to assert that they see through it, or that they do both: “‘If my penis makes you think that I am male, even though I feel myself to be a woman, then put me under the knife’” (Morel 33-34). To the extent that the notion of the common error is useful, though, perhaps the point to be taken from it is the following: that no matter what the sexual discourse makes of the impossibility of signifying sex, it will constitute an error. To distinguish ostensibly transpeople from ostensibly non-transpeople on the basis, in a sense, of who believes more in the organ as signifier (by



the way, would that be the transperson or the non-transperson?) seems to miss the larger point that the concept of the phallus is supposed to articulate: it is impossible to signify sex, and that will remain true no matter your gender, genders, or genderlessness.

## II. “[S]exual (im)possibilities”: Figures at the Limits of Sexual Difference

Butler turns to Lacan’s work on sexual difference in hopes of trying to think through the kinds of constraints that shape the “sexed” beings we may become. Her attention to constraints is intended to help clarify the vexed status of “construction” and to relieve it of its ostensible voluntarism: “[w]hat has been understood as the performativity of gender – far from the exercise of an unconstrained voluntarism – will prove to be impossible apart from notions of such political constraints registered psychically” (*Bodies That Matter* 94). Butler outlines her understanding of those political constraints through a reading of the Oedipal scenario, stating that she “will not consider the full domain of constraints on sex and sexuality” as that would constitute “a limitless task” but that she “does propose in a general way to take account of constraints as the limits of what can and cannot be constructed” (96). As such, the Oedipal scenario’s own status is somewhat uncertain here: what is the purview of Oedipus? What is its relationship to those “political constraints registered psychically”? Is Butler agreeing with those writings by Lacan that posit the Oedipal scenario as central to subjective existence (as for example in *Seminar III*, when he declares that “[a] neurosis without Oedipus doesn’t exist” [201])? Is she suggesting that psychoanalysis has influence over social norms, such that its own belief in

Oedipus would have the effect of reproducing the heteronormative version of Oedipal norms that Butler finds? Or is she suggesting more simply that the Oedipal scene expresses norms at work in the social – the site of “the full domain of constraints” –, norms or constraints that gather their strength from a variety of sources?

Butler’s reading of the Oedipal scene is concerned with castration as a “figure for punishment”: as Butler explains, “the fear of castration motivat[es] the assumption of the masculine sex, the fear of not being castrated motivat[es] the assumption of the feminine” (96). Butler declares that two figures hover at the margins of “the Lacanian scheme,” figures she equates, it seems, with a lack of fear of castration and lack of fear of not being castrated: “Implicit in the figure of castration ... are at least two inarticulate figures of abject homosexuality, the feminized fag and the phallicized dyke” (96). While Butler does not indicate which description of the Oedipal scene she is responding to here (a few pages later, she cites the following lines from the beginning of “The Signification of the Phallus”: “‘Why must he take up its [sex’s] attributes only by means of a threat, or even in the guise of a privation?’” [101]), the word “implicit” indicates her interpretive gesture. Of course, these figures would have to be implicit: they are inarticulate, abject, excluded, repudiated, and, as Butler will go on to suggest, eroticized. Butler suggests that “the Lacanian scheme presumes that the terror over occupying either of these positions is what compels the assumption of a sexed position within language, a sexed position that is sexed by virtue of its heterosexual positioning, and that is assumed through a move that excludes and abjects gay and lesbian populations” (96). The limits of sexual difference come to be, then, through “the regulation of phanastmatic identification ... the resistance to

identification with masculine feminization and feminine phallicization” (97). Both sexual difference and its limits in this scenario are matters of identification.<sup>62</sup>

While the limits of sexual difference thus materialize as particular figures, constraint is also more generally described as “what is difficult to imagine” and “what remains radically unthinkable”:

in the domain of sexuality these constraints include the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise, the absence of certain desires, the repetitive compulsion of others, the abiding repudiation of some sexual possibilities, panic, obsessional pull, and the nexus of sexuality and pain (94).

Butler is clearly concerned with what Morel identifies as the second register of sexuation – more specifically, with what Morel identifies as the “One” of discourse. While Butler speaks to the unthinkability of *desiring* otherwise, Morel speaks to the “One’s” attribution of a gender, transforming “it” into a “boy” or a “girl.” In Morel’s narration, what emerges as the radically unthinkable, the radically unendurable, absent and/or repudiated, is some gender other than “boy” or “girl,” or some assignation at birth not having to do with gender. At this point, Butler does not speak directly of transgender, but we can, I think, hear the future of transgender when Butler makes statements like this one: “The point of this analysis is not to affirm the constraints under which sexed positions are assumed, but to ask how the fixity of such constraints is established, what sexual (im)possibilities have served as the constitutive constraints of sexed positionality...” (96).

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<sup>62</sup> Butler indicates at a certain point her reading of Lacanian sexual difference *as* gender, identifying “[w]hat in Lacan would be called ‘sexed positions’” as “what some of us might more easily call ‘gender’...” (111).

For Butler, there is not a limit of sexual difference; there are *limits*. At these limits are certain figures, some which are defined but “inarticulate,” some which are undefined, and some which are too unthinkable to have any relation to shape whatsoever. Butler cautions, though, that she is not writing in the service of prescribing new and different identifications: “The point here is not to prescribe the taking on of new and different identifications. I invest no ultimate political hope in the possibility of avowing identifications that have conventionally been disavowed” (115). Butler points to the imperializing character of such a gesture:

The ideal of transforming all excluded identifications into inclusive features – of appropriating all difference into unity – would mark the return to a Hegelian synthesis which has no exterior and that, in appropriating all difference as exemplary features of itself, becomes a figure for imperialism, a figure that installs itself by way of a romantic, insidious, and all-consuming humanism (115-116).

If Butler cautions against an “all-consuming humanism” marked by the “ideal of transforming all excluded identifications into inclusive features,” she nonetheless insists that “there remains the task of thinking through the potential cruelties that follow from an intensification of identification that cannot afford to acknowledge the exclusions on which it is dependent” (116). We might bear this in mind as we reflect on “the potential cruelties that follow from” the kinds of gender identifications “that cannot afford to acknowledge the exclusions on which” they are dependent.

Butler’s readings of Lacan are, like my own, selective (something she acknowledges about her reading [72]). Just as I do not address those narratives of sexual difference that Lacan offers prior to the *Seminar XX, Encore* formulas, Butler does not write about the formulas. Consequently, Butler’s responses to Lacan’s sexual

difference, drawn in *Bodies That Matter* from “The Mirror Stage,” “The Meaning of the Phallus,” and *Seminars I, II, and III*, are concerned with the Oedipal scene that has dominated psychoanalysis for so long. In a sense it is no surprise that Butler finds much here to subject to her incisive eye, for the Oedipal scene is the realm of norms: the classical Oedipal subject, the obsessional, is, we might say, the subject most likely to find psychic support in whatever ideology of norms constitutes the milieu: the obsessional “binds himself to his ego” (Lacan, *Seminar II* 268); “[h]e effaces his pleasure so as not to arouse the anger of his master” (269). As I pointed out in Chapter One, though, there are not only Oedipal/obsessional subjects. In the writings by Lacan to which Butler turns, he has not yet elaborated his most radical take on sexual difference. Perhaps some psychoanalytic thinkers would object that the elements for the formulas, and thus for an explicitly logical account of sexual difference, are already there in the aforementioned texts; but, if they are, it does not seem that they are there in a form that lends itself as well to the transmission enabled by the formulas themselves. Perhaps it’s “the sexual discourse” that gets in the way.

Butler identifies the heteronormativity she finds in this sexual discourse and this appraisal is indeed critical; whatever Oedipus’s status may be in Butler’s own estimation, this kind of ideology critique of psychoanalysis is necessary if the latter wishes to be responsive to the analysands it will encounter. Moreover, to the extent that Lacan and his followers import heteronormative and gender-normative notions from “the sexual discourse” into their theorizations of the *logic* of sexual difference, Butler’s critiques likewise extend from the terrain of the normative limit(s) of sexual

difference (what Morel calls the “One” of discourse) to that of the logical limit of sexual difference.

### **III. Bodily Materiality: “It is a creation and a construction and not a gift” (Paul Schilder)**

Gayle Salamon’s *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* offers what we might call, in the schema I am trying to plot out of various kinds of “limits,” a radical take on “the organic.” “Organic” is not, of course, the word she would use: on the contrary, Salamon takes issue with feminist texts which re-assert a “natural” limit of sexual difference. Salamon is interested in rethinking the materiality of the body and the myriad mechanisms which act together so that a body may come to be; her description of psychoanalyst Paul Schilder’s conception of the body applies just as well to her own: “It would seem to be apparent that the body, in this account, is far from a simple biological given” (30). Bringing together phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and recent work on transgender, Salamon compellingly argues that these discourses have much to offer one another on questions of embodiment. Together, they allow us to think the body as not simply given and not simply a given – and as neither more nor less given for gender non-normative people than gender-normative ones.

Salamon’s project is a significant contribution to trans studies for a series of reasons, of which I will address only a few. First: Salamon confronts with rigor and elegance the critique that Butler in particular and queer theory in general are not concerned with the materiality of the body, finding this to be, among other things, a

misreading of the concept of social construction (73). Salamon responds in particular to *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser's important theorization of transsexual subjectivity and a text that takes Butler's *Gender Trouble* to task for putting "transgender" to work as a function which elucidates gender performativity (Prosser, *Second Skins* 26). Salamon suggests that Prosser's book "is emblematic of a trend in trans studies that appeals to bodily materiality in order to secure a firm foundation for both the specificity and difference of trans subjectivity" (37). Salamon suggests that this approach is problematic to the extent that it wishes to posit a bodily materiality that is nondiscursive (41) and for its reliance on "a set of disavowals whereby transsexuals' relation to their 'fleshy materiality' is uncomplicatedly and unproblematically positive and affirmative" (40).

As Salamon notes, of course, "It is easy to sympathize with the political aims of [Prosser's] strategy..." (4), but Salamon is interested in a more capacious understanding of the body, one where the body need not be qualified as – to quote Prosser's term – "unimpeachably real" (qtd. in Salamon 41) to be material and, indeed, to matter. Thus will Salamon rethink bodily materiality itself, calling on writers as diverse as Didier Anzieu, Butler, Freud, Griffin Hansbury, Luce Irigaray, Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Kaja Silverman, as well as works like the film *Boys Don't Cry*, Jan Morris's autobiography *Conundrum*, and Lily Rodriguez's photograph *Mud*, in order to demonstrate that the constructed and even uncertain body is no less material for being so. As she writes, "I seek to challenge the notion that the materiality of the body is something to which we have unmediated access, something of which we can have epistemological certainty, and contend that such

epistemological uncertainty can have great use, both ethically and politically, in the lives of the non-normatively gendered” (1).

Salamon is also interested in what “recent theorizations of transgendered and transsexual bodies” (1) might offer women’s studies and feminism. Salamon’s address to women’s studies is both poignant and pointed. According to Salamon, “if it is to reemerge as a vital discipline, women’s studies must become more responsive to emerging genders” (95); as she points out, “[g]enders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived, and the discipline of women’s studies has not yet taken account of this” (95). This, however, is a two-way street: “It is equally true that trans studies needs feminism. Trans studies in its current, nascent state is often dominated by a liberal individualist notion of subjectivity, in which a postgender subject possesses absolute agency and is able to craft hir gender with perfect felicity” (96). Salamon addresses the constraints and worldly impacts that construct any body, as for instance when she points out, drawing on the work of Schilder, that the construction of the body is not “an entirely voluntaristic project”: “‘There is no question,’ Schilder writes, ‘that our own activity is insufficient to build up the image of the body’” (31).

It is in the context of a series of responses to feminist work on sexual difference that Salamon engages “the problem of the limit.” Salamon critiques writings by feminists Elizabeth Grosz, Irigaray, and Bidy Martin in order to build toward the idea of a sexual difference that would, in a sense, leave more room for difference. Closely reading each of the aforementioned theorists, Salamon finds surprising returns to a “natural” or “organic” limit of sexual difference, limits which



take anxious shape around the figures of transpeople. But, as Salamon asks, “[m]ust sexual difference be legible at the surface of the body? And is sexual difference the same thing as ‘natural’ sex?” (151). What might happen “if we took seriously Irigaray’s insistence on the generative power of sexual difference as that which makes relationality possible, without positing an absolute identity within any sex as the ground for that difference?” (168). I would like to sketch out Salamon’s critique of Grosz in part to provide more context for Salamon’s own intervention: Salamon draws on many of the same theorists as Grosz (Anzieu, Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Schilder), but, as we have seen, Salamon does so in the service of a theory of embodiment that takes trans bodies as one of the points of departure; as she writes, “our current ideas of what a body is will be irremediably diminished until trans bodies and subjectivities are considered in a more thorough way” (1).

Salamon credits Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* as “a radical and important rethinking of corporeality” (146), one which “seems to offer... the possibility of a body that is pliable, labile, open to constantly shifting and shiftable identifications, transformations, and reworkings – a body that can exceed even the confines of its own skin” (147). This indeed is the language of Grosz’s text, which speaks to bodies which, “in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate, certain self-evidences” (Grosz 209). Difference (which Grosz seems to use interchangeably with “alterity”) is at the heart of Grosz’s account, as she argues that bodies themselves “insist on alterity... Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment: it conditions but is also a product of the pliability or plasticity of bodies which makes

them other than themselves, other than their ‘nature,’ their functions and identities” (209).

“But,” as Salamon finds, “not *too* pliable, not *infinitely* pliable” (149): there must be a limit, and Grosz expresses this limit in biological terms: “[t]he body is constrained by its biological limits... The body is not open to *all* the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject” (187). Still, Grosz explains that the body’s limits are not knowable in advance (187) and that they are susceptible to being overcome: “while there must be some kinds of biological limit or constraint, these constraints are perpetually capable of being superseded ... through the human body’s capacity to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment...” (187-188).

All of this valorization of lability and difference, however, effectively flies out the window both times that the subject of transwomen comes up (Grosz 201, 207), and this is why Salamon asserts that in fact Grosz finds the body’s limit in the limit of sexual difference (Salamon 149). While Grosz hesitates to state in a totalizing fashion what a “woman” is and notes too, in the context of a discussion of bodily fluids, that she is “not making claims for *all* gay men here... there are many ways in which gay men’s bodies can be lived and invested” (200), no such care is extended to transpeople. Instead, transpeople are “quite literally” (Salamon 146) at the limit of Grosz’s theory of sexual difference: as Salamon writes, “[t]he MTF transsexual that Grosz invokes to conclude *Volatile Bodies* forms a parallel and a pair with the FTM who introduces ‘Experimental Desires,’ twin instances of phantom transsexuals who quite literally mark the limits of Grosz’s ‘corporeal feminism’” (146). In the case of

*Volatile Bodies*, “the transsexual” materializes in the final pages of the book as the limit-case that proves that the “problematic of sexual difference entails a certain failure of knowledge to bridge the gap, the interval, between the sexes. There remains something ungraspable, something outside, unpredictable, and uncontainable, about the other sex for each sex” (Grosz 208). According to Grosz, “the transsexual” cannot bridge the gap, and, as Salamon sums up, “if it is still impossible to tell what a woman *is*, it is quite easy to determine what a woman *isn't*” (152). Salamon quotes Grosz extensively:

‘There will always remain a kind of outsidership or alienness of the experiences and lived reality of each sex for the other. Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his [*sic*] fantasy of femininity – a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman’ (qtd. in Salamon 152-153).

Salamon critiques Grosz’s presentation here for its “surprisingly familiar ... stereotypical figuration of the transsexual” (153) and for its tone of utter confidence in describing the internal workings of transpeople (154). This, as Salamon notes, “is a remarkable way to end a text that takes such care not to represent the experiences of women in a totalizing way” (154).

“How can we account, in a nonpathologizing way, for bodies that manifest sex in ways that exceed or confound binaries?” (Salamon 13). This indeed would be a corporeal feminism. Salamon asks at the end of “Sexual Indifference and the Problem of the Limit” if it would be possible “to think sexual difference as something that need not be located at the level of sex at all” (168), wishing to bring trans subjectivity and

trans embodiment in touch with Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference as, in Salamon's words, "that which makes relationality possible" (168). Phenomenology, too, offers language for thinking the import of relationality to embodiment:

... phenomenology, as we have seen, is a realm in which one's own perceptions retain pride of place as a means of determining truth. My own phenomenological mode of embodiment – of bodily configuration or comportment – is itself understood as constituting a truth. This does not mean that I construct the truth, whole cloth, from the cloister of my own experience, nor does it provide hallucination with the stamp of legitimacy. What it does mean is that my experience of my body, my sense of its extension and efficacy, the ways that I endeavor to make a habitable thing of it, and the use I make of it – or, in the throes of desire, perhaps the use that it makes of me – are my necessary relation to whatever materiality I am. The sexual schema is rather a way of becoming uncloistered in and through the body, in that it delivers my own body to me through the movement of my body toward another. Thus, through desire, my body is no longer a conglomeration of its various parts in their expression as 'inner phenomena,' but is suddenly the vehicle through which I am compelled into relation with the world, where it is finally only that relation that gives me a body (56).

Though Salamon does not herself write of the limit(s) of sexual difference or how a limit might make sense in the schema she is in the process of constructing, perhaps here is where it would be: if "the body one feels oneself to have is not necessarily the same body that is delimited by its exterior contours, and this is the case even for any normatively gendered subject" (14) – and if the body is "the vehicle through which I am compelled into relation with the world, where it is finally only that relation that gives me a body," then the materiality that the (sexual) body would be would be constructed through limit encounters with other materialities, bodies and objects that would loom and recess, change position, sting, impress, bend in and bend out. These clearly would not be unsurpassable or intractable limits, but limits like bodies, meaning, with holes, limits that implied porosity. They would also be limits as

moving targets, both singular in and of themselves and multiple, singularly sweet and singularly punishing as well as any number of other things (e.g., generous, measured, tentative, consuming), depending on the body/bodies in question and their worlds and others.

#### **IV. “How many do you want?”: A Logical Limit**

In a recent article, Copjec identifies a question she often fields in her “role as defender of the psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference” (“The Fable of the Stork” 63): “Why are there *two* sexes?” (63). This question may well sum up the core of the differend between (some) gender studies’ and Lacanian perspectives on sexual difference. We could shift the emphasis: *Why* are there two sexes? What is this insurmountable, unsurpassable limit? Is this limit unmoving? Can it be negotiated with, and if not, why not? What is the point of this limit, and what is the point of defending it? For discourses such as queer theory and gender studies, born to theorize and resist structures of oppression, born, in a sense, out of limits (limits we also called norms and constraints in previous sections), a limit which brooks no disagreement might seem indeed to run counter to sense. And in fact this, for Copjec, may be the point. Copjec responds to the question “Why are there *two* sexes?” by writing that “one of the first things psychoanalysis did was to relieve me of the obligation to answer the question as posed by removing purpose or utility from sex. Sexual difference serves no purpose... Sex is ‘without why’” (71). This seems, on the one hand, to leave the entire differend intact, unchallenged, and without explanation: Copjec explains that she does not need to explain why there “are” two sexes (even

though, as we will see, she goes on to do so); on the other hand, Copjec's response also is, already, an answer, one which models the very limit it means to defend: sexual difference is itself a sort of limit, a white noise, something unfathomable, it runs "au contraire du sens" 'counter to meaning' and "à contre sens" 'in the opposite direction' (Lacan, *Séminaire XX* 119).

Part of the dispute, of course, resides in determining what is meant by this word "sex" in the first place. In *Read My Desire* and "The Fable of the Stork," Copjec plots out two quite different, but complementary, accounts of it. The first draws on Kant's accounts of the antinomies of reason and Lacan's formulas to argue that sex is "the impossibility of completing meaning" (206) and that there are two distinct ways for language and reason to fail (213); the second draws on Freud's "On the Sexual Theories of Children" to argue that sex is a question about being and that one can pose the question of being from either "the side of the void or the side of the symbolic" (72). In both articles, Copjec insists that there is a two-ness to sex that cannot be negotiated with (although in the latter article, she also makes the following statement: "It is not that I cannot imagine ever having a thoughtful conversation about whether there are two or more sexes" [69]). What are these two sexes Copjec describes?

In her foundational essay "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" in *Read My Desire*, Copjec turns to Kant's antinomies of reason as a means of furnishing a "philosophical objection" (204) to Butler's account of "sex" in the latter's *Gender Trouble*. Butler's argument depends, Copjec suggests, on a certain rule of language: the fact that discourse is ongoing. This rule of language embroils us in the contradiction with which Kant is concerned in *The Critique of Pure Reason*: "One

term acquires meaning only through its difference from all the others – ad infinitum, since the final term[ ] is never at hand” (Copjec 205). The antinomy of this rule of language is that it

enjoins us not only to believe in the inexhaustibility of the process of meaning, in the fact that there will always be another signifier to determine retroactively the meaning of all that have come before, it also requires us to presuppose ‘all the other signifiers,’ the total milieu that is necessary for the meaning of one. The completeness of the system of signifiers is both demanded and precluded by the same rule of language. Without the totality of the system of signifiers there can be no determination of meaning, and yet this very totality would prevent the *successive* consideration of signifiers that the rule requires (205).

Copjec suggests that Butler’s mistake lies in attributing the instability of the *term* “woman” – “*woman* itself is a term in a process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end” (Butler, qtd. in *Read My Desire* 204) – to the status of “woman as such”: “Butler concludes from the changing *concepts* of women something about the *being*, the *existence* of women” (204); she “notes merely that signification is always in process and then concludes from this that there is no stability of sex” (206). According to Copjec, this is an error in Kantian terms for it “attribut[es] objective reality to an idea which is valid only as a rule” (Kant, qtd. in *Read My Desire* 206).

Copjec adds a step in order to accommodate Kant’s antinomies of reason with the question of sex: as she notes just after the above,

this is misleading, for it seems to imply that sex is something that is beyond language, something that language forever fails to grasp. We can follow Kant on this point only if we add the proviso that we understand the Thing-in-itself to mean nothing but the impossibility of thinking – articulating – it. When we speak of language’s failure with respect to sex, we speak not of its falling short of a prediscursive object but of its falling into contradiction with itself. Sex coincides with this *failure*, this inevitable contradiction. Sex is, then, the impossibility of completing meaning, not (as Butler’s

historicist/deconstructionist argument would have it) a meaning that is incomplete, unstable (206).

Where Butler's position on sex, according to Copjec, plots out "a description of the *effect* of the inherent failure of discourse – a riot of sense in which one meaning constantly collides with another" (211), Copjec will attempt to think sex *as* the failure of language. Here, then, is where Copjec finds the fundamental difference in their treatments of sexual difference: Butler, Copjec alleges, is interested in the effect of the inherent failure of discourse but not in its cause, which Copjec identifies as "the impossibility of saying everything in language" (211). According to Copjec, this leaves Butler's position on sex a voluntaristic one, lacking in "any proper notion of the unsurpassable limit" (210). As we have seen, Butler will turn around and situate that limit in the constraints expressed by psychoanalysis's own theories of sexual difference.

But, these are quite different sorts of limits. At least, they are different in principle: does Copjec import signs of a normative limit into the realm of the logical? How would she differentiate the two? Copjec suggests that the "the Kantian/psychoanalytic argument" actually goes further than Butler's in the "desubstantialization of sex": if, in Butler's account, sex constitutes "an *incomplete* entity," in the Kantian/psychoanalysis account, it is "a totally empty one" (207). A sex which is subject to the signifier, Copjec suggests, may "communicate[ ] itself to others," but when it becomes "*disjoined* from the signifier, it becomes that which does not communicate, that which marks the subject as unknowable" (207).



As we know, though, the limit does not stop here: the point is not simply that sex renders the subject unknowable, end of story; the point is that sex renders the subject unknowable in either one way or the other: according to Copjec, “while the subject... is ... free of absolute social constraint, he or she is nevertheless *not* free to be a subject any which way: within any discourse the subject can only assume either a male or a female position” (210). Of course, if sex is a totally empty entity, then these terms – “male,” “female” – cannot be predicates: sexual difference – “male” or “female” for Copjec – “does not positively describe the subject... *male and female, like being, are not predicates, which means that rather than increasing our knowledge of the subject, they qualify the mode of the failure of our knowledge*” (212).

It will be the unknowability of the subject that will serve as the central trope for the description of sex in Copjec’s later article. Here, Copjec is expressly concerned with the fall-out involved in debates between gender studies and psychoanalysis about how many sexes there may be. As she remarks, speaking more generally to the state of the study of “theory” in various disciplines, “the disagreement over what constitutes a proper question is the bloodiest of all, a battle for the legitimacy of the terms by which one approaches the world” (65). She turns, then, to children’s questions about sexuality, as presented by Freud, implicitly positing these as the terms by which psychoanalysis itself would approach the world. Psychoanalysis is different from other discourses, according to Copjec, because “[t]he human subject is not simply that being whose being remains a question for her; rather, the human subject is, as *sexuated* being, the being whose being raises questions for

her. Or: it is specifically the experience of sexuality that raises the question of being by rendering the subject inconspicuous, opaque to herself” (67).

Copjec offers a series of useful and lovely formulations in this text. In a way, Copjec goes much further than Morel in describing how, “[f]or psychoanalysis, sexual difference is not a question of anatomy” (Morel, “Psychoanalytical Anatomy” 28). The sexuatered body is beautifully denaturalized and defamiliarized, as for example when she explains the sense of Lacan’s maxim that there is no sexual relation: “The maxim says: the obstacle [to the sexual relation] is not extraneous to sex but part of its definition. What sexual obstacles reveal is a fault, a tear, in the symbolic universe; a void opens and thus forces the symbolic to incline or curve away from itself. This void gives berth to sex, which can be defined as an investment in the void” (72). The homonymy of berth/birth captured here almost hearkens back to the kinds of limits I tried adducing to Salamon’s account of the materiality-in-relation that the sexual body would be; both space and construction, indent or hollow and projection, this birth/berth is given to sex by the void (meaning that sex both acquires berth and comes into “being” thanks to the void). Instead of the language of gender, what we have here is something more poetic. Another such formulation arrives as Copjec goes on to explain why there are two sexes:

If one accepts that sex divides and singularizes the subject, one needs to say why one continues nevertheless to insist on the two of sexual difference. My answer is this: every subject experiences the enigma of his/her divided, singular, sexuatered being from one or the other side of the symbolic tear, from the side of the void or the side of the symbolic. The difference in these positions gives rise to the distinct forms through which the enigma takes shape (72).

If, drawing on Copjec's language, sex is "that which does not communicate itself"; if one may experience this enigma from either "the side of the void or the side of the symbolic"; if the positions Copjec names "male" and "female" do not describe the subject... does this not mean that those positions are occupied by men, women, *and* the rest of us genderqueers, intersex people, and transfolk? That we are "sexual" because we desire, because of the excess of libido instituted/broken off because of the fact of language, and that we are "sexuated" because we can, in the unconscious, take one or the other stance with respect to that loss? That there are, logically, two sexes – two positions within language, two different modes of jouissance, two stances with respect to the impossibility of saying it all, two stances with respect to the signifier of the subject's lack in being – and that "men, women, and the rest of us" (Bornstein) occupy those sites in some way regardless of our relationship to the (ever-shifting) "sexual discourse" which "defines" who is a "male" and who is a "female"? We might ask after the efficacy of the language Copjec uses to define the positions of the unknowable, sexuated subject (or the subject who is unknowable because sexuated): the terms "male" and "female" seem to harken back to a mythical real, to a mythical "nature" where one might find oneself "at one" amongst the "males" and "females" of the "animal world," where there is ostensibly no signifier. Why not "all" and "not-all?" Why indeed does Lacan not narrate the formulas with a similar distance from the gendered language of the second register of sexuation? To what extent does psychoanalysis wish to posit that the language of the second level of sexuation finds form or makes sense in the third?

## **Conclusion: A Different Limit**

I have argued throughout this project for an understanding of sexual difference which would reference not gender or “biological sex” (the “male sex” or the “female sex”) but a subject’s position with respect to language, and I base this understanding on a reading of Lacan’s formulas of sexualization. I have been interested too in elaborating a theory of transgender subjectivity, and I suggested in Chapter One that we might understand the version of transgender subjectivity of interest to this project as a “hysterical,” “feminine” or “not-all” phenomenon from within the Lacanian paradigm. It may be important to clarify that I am not suggesting that transgender subjectivity consists of being, for example, “unconsciously masculine” but identifying as a “woman.” I pointed in Chapter One to Lacan’s indication that any subject may line up under one banner or the other: “[a]ny speaking being whatsoever, as is expressly formulated in Freudian theory, whether provided with the attributes of masculinity – attributes that remain to be determined – or not, is allowed to inscribe itself in [the feminine position]” (*Encore* 80). I did so not to plot this out as a form of “crossing” but to combat the idea that sexual difference would be reducible to gender. If Lacan notes that one can be unconsciously feminine but identify as a man, it is to point out the disjunct between one’s unconscious sexualization and one’s gender identification/s. This indicates that we cannot necessarily determine a person’s *unconscious* sexualization based on his/her/hir gender identification. And this last point, to my mind, further suggests that we cannot assume that a man, woman, transman, transwoman, or anyone else, is necessarily identifying “outsidensex” (Millot 135) – for example, as Millot writes, “aim[ing] to incarnate The Woman” (42) – on the basis of his/her/hir gender

identification. This reasoning works both ways, of course: for this also means that we cannot assume that any transgender-identified person is necessarily hysterical/feminine/not-all in the Lacanian sense.

What we can say is that, according to psychoanalytic literature, “not-all” subjects oftentimes embody a subversive attitude with respect to gender identifications: as Lacan notes, “uncertainty about one’s sex is a common feature of hysteria” (“On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” 456). They are perhaps the subjects most likely to find their sexed bodies to be irreducible to any imaginary identification. In this way, they raise the question of the impossibility of sex, finding that nothing in the social accounts for their sexed being. Resisting the ready limit of the language of norms, such subjects contend otherwise with the enigma of sexuated being. “Hysterical identifications are always partial,” Gherovici writes; “The hysterical question is thus inexhaustible: ‘Am I a man or a woman?’ has to remain a frustrated query” (212); but “being not-whole, [the not-all subject] has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance” (Lacan, *Encore* 73). This does not mean that transgender subjectivity is without limit; quite the contrary. For one thing, it is not necessarily an enviable position to be in, entailing as it sometimes does a “renunciation of enjoyment” (Juliet Flower MacCannell 201); according to Gherovici, “[d]esire remains always as an enigma for the hysteric” (101). But, ironically, transgender subjectivity may also be the best expression of the truth that psychoanalysis – for all its norms and failures – can share with students of gender theory: the idea “the body will never find in language a harmonious home” (Gherovici 212).

It is not certain at this time that the gender binary will maintain its hold on imaginings about the possibilities of gendered embodiment (and if it fades from discourse, the not-all subject will find another way to ask the burning question of the failure of the sexual relation), but it is certain that, so long as it does, it will cause suffering; as Riki Wilchins writes in *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Gender Binary*,

Every model of reality has margins where it begins to run out of explanatory steam, where we can see its problems and limitations. This anthology is about the people at those margins and thus about those who have found their bodies the target of discrimination because they transcended narrow stereotypes, because they were perceived as too old, young, black, short, fat, disabled, deaf, hairy, ill, butch, flamboyant, or any of a thousand other things. In short, this is about all of us.

We're not the ones who are broken. It's the model that's broken. The model of Western thought about bodies itself, and much more besides. So, welcome to my breakdown ("Queerer Bodies" 34-35).

More integrally, however, and beyond an identificatory register, what causes suffering is that there is a limit as such (as Wilchins notes, "this is about all of us"). Wilchins might locate the limit as the point where any model of reality finds itself without explanation, or as the fact that such points exist around the edges of any model of reality; Copjec might call it the impossibility of language to say it all; Lacan states that it is "constituted by the fact that there are beings who speak." The limit is constituted by the fact that there are beings who speak because there is something which cannot be said: sexuality "render[s] the subject inconspicuous, opaque to herself" (Copjec, "The Fable of the Stork" 67). In Freud's terms, as Copjec reminds us, there is "a piece of ignorance that cannot be made good" (qtd. in "The Fable of the Stork" 67). Subjects may encounter that limit either from the side of the void or the side of the

symbolic, but those subjects who encounter it from the side of the void – feminine subjects, hysterical subjects, those I have been calling transgender subjects – serve to remind us that no sense will make up for its effects.

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