

Woman Personified:
A Theoretical Framework for the Female Gender
of Personifications in Medieval Literature

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PERSONIFICATIONS IN medieval literature have for the greater part appeared in female form. In being personified, an abstract concept is translated to a “sentient human capable of thought and language, possessing *voice* and *face*.”¹ The concept receives a human identity, and included in that identity is gender. Which gender it receives is partly dependent on the grammatical gender of the noun, and this explains why personifications are mostly female: abstract nouns tend to be feminine. However, the implications of the social identity of personifications should not be disregarded. Even if grammar determines the gender of a personification, it is clear that the gender of a personified figure in its turn determines how this figure is described, what she can and cannot do, and how she relates to others in a narrative. In fact, it is plausible that the female gender of personifications is essential to how that personification functions, so that grammatical gender would be overruled if it would not align with social gender. So, when asking why personifications are so often female, it makes sense not to draw the line at grammar.

Therefore, we should not reduce personifications to grammar, but neither should we do the reverse and reduce them to the concepts that they stand for. The latter is a way of thinking about personifications that is apparent in Barbara Newman’s book *God and the Goddesses*:

1. James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42.

Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages.² This book was the first to comprehensively engage with the gender of personifications. It brilliantly describes how feminine aspects of God are personified and function as mediators between humans and the divine. Newman calls these allegorical figures “goddesses” instead of “female personifications” in order to stress the fact that these figures were not mere literary ornaments, but instead enjoyed a high degree of spiritual reality and were integral to the kind of thinking that she calls “imaginative theology.”³ However, Newman starts out from the observation that “[t]o conceive of goddesses . . . is not to evince any particular attitude toward women. It is simply to exercise the religious imagination.”⁴ I want to suggest that Newman’s own book indicates otherwise. I do not contradict the fact that many medieval personifications carry deep spiritual meaning, only that this would make them immune to social meaning. We should not deem personifications, as representations of the religious imagination, to be uninfluenced by the workings of social identity. Gender is essential to ideational constructs as well.⁵

Many scholars have expanded these grammatical and theological views on female personifications to explanations based on gender theory. In this article, I would like to map the different theories that have been proposed and offer a framework for uniting them. The problem with the literature on this subject is not that there is a lack of valuable propositions, but rather that most authors position themselves exclusively against the theory of grammatical determinism and not in relation to

2. Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

3. Newman, 292–304. Newman defines imaginative theology as follows: “Imaginative theology is the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature, especially vision, dialogue, and personification” (292).

4. Newman, 39.

5. As is attested to by the work of Caroline Walker Bynum: *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

other theories. Because of this, multiple partial theories exist whose only lack is that they claim exclusivity; they actually do not contradict each other, but can, on the contrary, be fitted into one framework.

I want to base this framework, first, on the existing research on sex, gender, and sexuality in the Middle Ages. The field is enormously fruitful, which will allow me to build my arguments about personification on these theories without further argumentation on my part about the nature of medieval sex, gender, and sexuality; references will suffice.⁶ I will only give an introduction as to how this literature corresponds to the theoretical framework that I want to use, which is Simone de Beauvoir's existential philosophy of gender as developed in *The Second Sex*. Of special interest here is the relation between binary and hierarchical conceptions of gender. I will then bring together in this framework the critical literature on personification allegory by giving an overview of the arguments that are used to explain the female gender of personifications. I will distinguish three levels to which these explanations refer: the personifier, the personified, and the personification as a literary figure. The first is the representation of a female figure at the literal level; the second is the idea that is represented by that female figure and after which she is named; and the third is the literary practice of personification. These terms are borrowed from James Paxson, who models them on the structuralist concept of a sign as consisting of a signifier and a signified. The personifier is described by him as "a standardized narrative actant: s/he is a mobile and active human being, endowed with speech, and representative of a specific psychological, physiological, and ideological constitution."⁷ The personified is what gets "figurally translated into the personifier."⁸

My goal is to show that the same concepts reappear at every level.

6. My main sources are the work of Caroline Walker Bynum (see note 5); *Framing medieval bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005); *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

7. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification*, 40.

8. Paxson, 40.

These concepts that one finds governing the ideational value of the personified concept as well as the dominant literary discourse about personification are the same ones that structure gender relations. Therefore, the choice for a female personification character indicates a use of the social structures of gender at every level of the personification allegory. In short, the article provides a structured overview of research that corroborates the hypothesis that the appearance of female personifications as literary figures entails the use of women's bodies both as bearers of symbolism and gender roles in a patriarchal society.

I define personification, following Paxson, as “the translation of any non-human quantity into a sentient human capable of thought and language, possessing voice and face.”⁹ Paxson categorizes personification as a subset of anthropomorphism (“the figural translation of any non-human quantity into a character that has human form”), which is in turn the subset of the general category substantialization (“the figural translation of any non-corporeal quantity into a physical, corporeal one”).¹⁰ A personification figure has to possess voice and face, which means that the figure should be described and should speak. Personification allegory is thus more than a trope. To say that the Church is the mother of the faithful is to use personification as a trope, but the Church becomes an allegorical character only when her appearance is described in a text, when she interacts with her children and speaks to them.¹¹ This is the actual subject of the article, but because there is much useful literature on the use of the gendered metaphors closely connected to these personifications, I will also refer to this literature to corroborate my argument.

Personifications may embody either “concepts, values, abstractions or

9. Paxson, 42.

10. Paxson, 42.

11. Paxson distinguishes between personification figures, which are “all implementations of the trope personification in narrative, in the short lyric, in drama, in non-verbal arts, in rhetorically ornamental fictional dialogue or in everyday speech,” and personification characters, which is “the employment of the trope in the narratorial invention of actual characters, objects, or places that occupy the material space-time of the fabular, or ‘story’ level of a narrative text.” Paxson, 35.

generalities.”¹² This article focuses on those “concepts, values, abstractions or generalities” that are valued positively, because it is there that modern (and sometimes pre-modern) readers discern a paradox: why would a society that generally devalues the feminine in favor of the masculine represent its highest, most noble or most divine concepts as women? Of course, what also has to be taken into account is the sheer force of tradition. The decisive factor in making personifications female is the fact that there is a literary tradition of female personification. Still, it is the way in which the gender of these personifications is then used rhetorically that is of interest here. Furthermore, my framework only seeks to explain the female gender of personifications on the theoretical level; how personifications might function in the practice of reading and what ethical implications might follow is not further elaborated.

This article gives a structured overview of the hypotheses that have been posited with regard to the female gender of personifications in medieval literature. Sometimes these hypotheses are founded on texts from other historical periods as well; I take these into account when I think they may prove useful for medieval texts. I have thus tried to be as inclusive as possible, with the consequence of making generalizations that disregard the specificity of historical periods, literary genres, and individual authors. However, my article is meant first and foremost as an aid to further and more specific research on the topic. Not all hypotheses will apply equally to any specific personification or allegorical text, nor will they apply as straightforwardly and harmoniously as is assumed here. Especially considering the fact that the concept of gender itself is constantly in motion and made up of constantly shifting relations, it is obvious that a general framework can never capture this complexity. However, a broad overview of all the elements that could be taken into account when assessing female personifications can still be useful. It can provide a touchstone for measuring the similarities between and specificities of individual texts.

12. Daisy Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies: Power and Gender in Late Medieval France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 20.

Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Gender and Medieval Conceptions of Gender

I want to build my framework on the principles structuring gender relations that we can derive from Simone de Beauvoir's classical work *The Second Sex*. This existential-phenomenological study of gender looks at Jean-Paul Sartre's process of "othering" in its most basic form, namely the relation between man and woman.¹³ Just as every individual is a radically free self who reduces others to the objects of his/her consciousness, woman has been made the object in relation to man the subject: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."¹⁴ Woman is thus defined as the object of a subject that is both positive and neutral. When she is opposed to man, she is viewed negatively. In a binary opposition, man and woman, or masculinity and femininity, are characterized respectively as rational and irrational, transcendent and immanent, active and passive, productive and reproductive, individual and collective, spirit and body. However, woman is not only associated with the negative. Because she is everything that man is not, she is both what he fears and despises, as what he hopes for and desires. De Beauvoir explains how woman, as "the Other," can be both evil and good: "The Other is Evil; but being necessary to the Good, it turns into the Good; through it I attain to the Whole, but it also separates me therefrom; it is the gateway to the infinite and the measure of my finite nature."¹⁵

13. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

14. de Beauvoir, 16.

15. de Beauvoir, 175. "She is all that man desires and all that he does not attain. She is the good mediatrix between propitious Nature and man; and she is the temptation of unconquered Nature, counter to all goodness. She incarnates all moral values, from good to evil, and their opposites; she is the substance of action and whatever is an obstacle to it, she is man's grasp on the world and his frustration: as such she is the source and origin of all man's reflection on his existence and of whatever expression he is able to give to it . . . He projects upon her what he desires and what he fears, what he loves and what he hates. And if it is so difficult to say anything specific about her, that is because man seeks the whole of himself in her and because she is All. She

Nature and the bodily existence of humans can be valued either negatively or positively. When women are opposed to men and placed lower in the hierarchy, women are viewed negatively, but inasmuch as they complete men and provide the material foundations for humankind, they are viewed positively. So, on the one hand, we must attend to the principles that structure the relation between self and other, namely hierarchy, relationality, and the union of opposites, and, on the other hand, we must take into account the specific characteristics that are ascribed to women in this system: immanence, which involves corporality and sexuality, mediation, and collectivity. These characteristics are ascribed to women because they describe a principle that is lower in the hierarchy, that complements the higher principle to which it is opposed but also essential. How do medieval conceptions of gender correspond to this theory? We find that, if we want to give a general overview of medieval *systematic thinking* about gender (which is, of course, different from the lived experience of gender), these principles apply very well to the Middle Ages. I am taking the broad category of “gender in the Middle Ages” here to refer to the structures of gender that supposedly did remain stable through the myriads of changes, negotiations, and contestations that make up the concept of gender at any given time and place. Concepts such as the relation between self and other or the immanence that is ascribed to women seem broad enough to carry all of the theories that I will discuss and that pertain to different times and places. The crucial point in my discussion will be how binary and hierarchical ways of seeing gender are related.

In 1990, Thomas Laqueur proposed a radically new way of looking at the history of sex and gender in his seminal work *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*.¹⁶ Building on Michel Foucault’s theories of sexuality and his own extensive study of historical accounts of anatomy, he posited that the western model of looking at sex and gender is only as old as the Enlightenment. Before that period, he claims, “men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical

is All, that is, on the plane of the inessential; she is all the Other” (229).

16. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male.”¹⁷ So, not only gender but also sex was a matter of degree and place in the hierarchy. In fact, Laqueur asserts that, whereas we now view the physical body as “real” and cultural meanings as “epiphenomenal,” earlier periods would have seen sex as an epiphenomenon to the primary category of cultural gender: “To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category.”¹⁸ However, medievalists have contested the extent to which Laqueur’s concept is applicable to the Middle Ages. Joan Cadden, while admitting that there is much evidence for Laqueur’s “one-sex model,” points out that there is as much, if not more, evidence to be found for the existence of other models as well.¹⁹ She advocates a view in which several differing, overlapping, and contrasting models exist within a culture at the same time. This is not Laqueur’s only generalization. He also focuses almost exclusively on anatomical treatises, especially the illustrations of female and male genitals as identical in form but reversed. Further, he sees the Middle Ages merely as the period that latently carried over ideas from Antiquity to the Renaissance. However, Galen’s treatise *On the Use of Parts*, the classical work that supposedly spread the theory of genital homology through the centuries, “did not play a direct role in the main conversation about reproductive roles, sex determination, and sexual pleasure in the natural philosophy or medicine of the late Middle Ages,”²⁰ according to Cadden, and Katharine Park confirms that “before 1500 [she] could find no convincing expressions of the idea of genital homology at all, even as an alternative to be discarded.”²¹ Laqueur’s model does not completely misrepresent medieval conceptions about sex and gender, but it needs to be modified. Of course, there certainly

17. Laqueur, 5-6.

18. Laqueur, 8.

19. Joan Cadden. *Meanings of Sex Difference In the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

20. Cadden, 108.

21. Katharine Park, “Cadden, Laqueur, and the ‘one-sex body,’” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46, no.1 (2010): 99.

was a hierarchy between the sexes. However, this does not mean that medieval people did not also imagine two sexes opposed to each other: “the binary opposition between men and women was extraordinarily strong in medieval society. Although theorists might write that females were defective males, their defects were significant enough that no one seriously considered them the same as males; they were in a quite different category.”²²

We may better understand how the idea of hierarchy and the binary model of sex were reconciled in the Middle Ages by taking a look at Christian Neoplatonist thought.²³ In the Neoplatonist worldview, everything in between pure being and non-being finds itself in a position of relativity: as an emanation from the One it is positive, but as a derived form of being it is negative. Such is also the case with men and women. Not only are they positioned within this hierarchy, with men at a higher level of being than women, but also “male” and “female” are used metaphorically to describe relations within the whole continuum. Maleness means spirituality, intellect, and soul, a higher position, while femaleness indicates materiality, the senses, and the body, or a lower position. At every level, two entities, a lower and a higher principle, come together to form a unity. Thus, woman is accorded a place that is lower in the hierarchy, and she basically functions as the material for men to inhabit, but she is not a defective man: her position is viewed as positive inasmuch as it complements man’s being. Also, Christianity values highly the self-sacrificing descent of a higher principle to lower regions, even if it does not value the lower principle in itself. Christ took on humanity to save all people, and his humanity corresponds to a female position. That women signified the humanity of Christ could be used to create a positive identity for themselves.²⁴ We often find

22. Karras, *Doing unto others*, 5.

23. See Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman As Image In Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 2; Londa Schiebinger, “Feminine Icons: The Face of Early Modern Science,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no.4 (1988): 673, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343667>: “The most fruitful context for understanding the feminine icon is Christian Neoplatonism.” I will expand upon this in the following section.

24. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast; Fragmentation*.

imagery of gender reversals in medieval literature, although men use this rhetoric more than women, the latter stressing their humanity instead of their difference from men.²⁵ Medieval writers and artists thus used gender imagery “more fluidly and less literally than we do,” which does not imply that social roles were any less strict or hierarchic, but which did open up symbolic possibilities.²⁶ There is, of course, much that escapes from the hierarchical binary, characteristics and configurations of personifications that do not quite fit into this system. The study of these instances promises to be most interesting. I believe, however, that personifications were conceptualized within a way of thinking gender as binary and hierarchical and of seeing these two aspects as indissolubly intertwined. I do not think female personifications defy gender norms by their mere existence. Neither do I think that they inevitably conform to those norms. This article, sketching the position of personifications within the system, will not be able to show where they diverge from it, but this is not to deny that they often do.

A Framework for Analyzing the Gender of Personifications

The most basic way of explaining the gender of the majority of late antique, medieval, and early modern personifications is by pointing out that they materialize abstract nouns of the feminine grammatical gender. If personification allegory relies on the “reification of language itself,”²⁷ such as the animation of nouns, then of course feminine nouns are reified as female persons. As Maureen Quilligan explains, “personifications of abstractions such as Philosophy and Nature take the feminine form primarily because allegory always works narratively by literalizing lexical

25. Bynum, *Fragmentation*. Christina Cedillo, “Habitual Gender: Rhetorical Androgyny in Franciscan Texts,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31, no.1 (2015): 65-81, doi:10.2979/jfemistudreli.31.1.65.

26. Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no.3 (1986): 434, doi:10.2307/2862038.

27. Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 115. Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s “Cité des Dames”* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

effects. The gender of abstract nouns made from verbs in Latin is always feminine ... and so the personifications embodying these concepts take on the gender of the words: Lady Philosophy, Lady Fortuna.”²⁸ This explanation was first used in modern times by Joseph Addison and has been used as a sufficient explication many times since.²⁹ Evidence that grammar plays a role in determining the gender of personifications is the fact that, after grammatical gender declined in European vernaculars around the turn of the millennium, male personifications started to appear more often. In English literature, for instance, Alfred the Great translated Boethius’ *Philosophia* as the male Wisdom, and both Langland and Bunyan employed a majority of male personifications.³⁰

However, one of the earliest uses of the grammatical argument from a ninth century commentary on Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* immediately makes clear that we cannot rest content with the explanation offered by grammar alone:

[Boethius] conjures up a picture of Philosophy as a woman; and he imagines her in the form of a woman, because the word was spoken in the feminine gender in Greek and Latin; and because she leads her listeners on as if with some elementary principles to perfect knowledge, or like a mother she suckles her infants and feeds her sons; or because women are seductresses, and just as women allure men, so Philosophy, with her appearance of perfect beauty, allures wise men.³¹

28. Quilligan, *Allegory of Female Authority*, 24-25.

29. For a broader overview of the history of the grammatical argument, see Newman, *God and the Goddesses*; James Paxson, “Gender Personified, Personification Gendered, and the Body Figuralized in Piers Plowman,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 65-96 and “Personification’s Gender,” *Rhetorica* 16, no.2 (1998), 149-79, doi:10.1525/rh.1998.16.2.149.

30. Newman, *God and the goddesses*; Helen Cooper, “Gender and Personification in Piers Plowman,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 31-48.

31. Quoted by Cooper, “Gender and Personification,” 31. “Configurat sibi mulierem Philosophiam; ideoque in speciem mulieris Philosophiam configurat, quia et apud Graecos et apud Latinos feminino genere pronuntiatur et auditores suos quasi quibusdam rudimentis adducit ad perfectam scientiam uel uti mater teneros lactat et nutrit filios. Vel ideo quia mulieres allectrices sunt: sicut mulieres alliciunt uiros, ita Philosophia specie perfectionis suae allicit homines sapientes.”

Philosophia's gender is first connected to grammar, but then the author adds that it seems normal that philosophy would be represented as a woman because she feeds men with wisdom just like mothers feed their babies or because she allures men with the beauty of wisdom just like women allure men. The personification's function is compared to certain roles which women perform, in particular those of mother and seductress. It is futile to try and detach grammar from social meaning, because we clearly see that feminine *abstracta* are associated with feminine characteristics time and again. From the moment that a concept is personified, it becomes a person and thus it is assigned a gender and the corresponding social position, role, and behavior. From that moment, social gender *is* relevant to a personification's gender.

There are other arguments to refute the deterministic power of grammar. For example, Barbara Newman notes that male personifications are almost never of the kind she calls "Platonistic" as opposed to "Aristotelian," "reading the former as epiphanies or emanations of a superior reality, the latter as 'accidents existing in a substance,' personified only for the sake of analytical clarity."³² She claims that male personifications never become as real, emotionally accessible, numinous, and serious as female personifications. Therefore, not only is it so that female personifications are linked to feminine roles and characteristics, but also the female gender of personifications apparently assures the figure's effectiveness in a way that maleness does not. Their gender is essential to the functioning of the personification as an emanation of the divine. Therefore, I will now proceed to give an overview of the critical literature drawing on gender theory in explaining the gender of personifications. I will draw together a variety of arguments and present them in the context of the framework that was sketched earlier.

The Level of the Personifier: Women

According to de Beauvoir, woman is defined as everything that man is not: she is immanent and passive, she is nature, materiality, and the body. It may appear strange, then, that divine concepts would take on

32. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 34.

female shapes. However, the fact that women personify positive and even divine concepts does not necessarily mean that they are no longer women. On the contrary, feminine characteristics such as immanence and materiality and their status as object in relation to a male subject assure the effectiveness of personification allegory. I will first discuss how the position of women in the binary-hierarchical structure of gender relations may contribute to the effectiveness of female personification allegory. First, personifications, as *material* renderings of an abstract idea, might be female because women, as opposed to men, are associated with immanence and materiality. Second, personifications, which mediate between humans and the divine, might be female because women relate humans mutually.

Materiality and Immanence

First, I will discuss the implications of the fact that materiality and immanence are coded as feminine. Because corporality is associated with femaleness, personifications might be female simply because they have bodies. But there is a deeper link between allegorical personifications, materialization, and femaleness. Medieval allegorical creation developed within the context of Neoplatonism.³³ Late-antique Neoplatonists carried forward to the Middle Ages the ideas that language is naturally linked to meaning and that allegory is capable of conveying knowledge about the divine.³⁴ These ideas were brought into practice most notably by poets influenced by the so-called “School of Chartres,” namely the philosophical allegorists Bernard Silvestris, Alan of Lille, and Jean of Hauville.³⁵ Two elements carry the narrative structure of their allegories:

33. Peter T. Struck, “Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

34. Struck, 57.

35. See Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); Jon Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Jon Whitman, “Twelfth-Century Allegory: Philosophy and Imagination,” in Copeland and Struck, *Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, 101-16.

cosmology and personification. For us, what is most important is the way in which cosmology and personification are intertwined. The creation and the constitution of the cosmos happens through emanation, which is depicted as a deeply gendered process. The universe is constituted by an immaterial entity that is wholly transcendent, “the One.” The One is the source of everything and contains everything that exists, but it is also situated above everything else. It creates the different dimensions of the universe by emanating “pure being.” The cosmos thus consists of ever-descending layers of meaning. A first level of emanation is the realm of Mind or intellectual reality. A second emanation is the realm of the Soul. This level in turn generates the world and everything that is material. How is this theory of emanation gendered? The creation of the cosmos is depicted as the descent of the masculine principle, which is one and all and in itself perfect, into the realm of the feminine, which is other and in motion. The universe is constituted by their convergence. We thus recognize the binary-hierarchical model of gender and the concept of the female as “other.” In this model of the world, it is not surprising to find those natural powers that govern the cosmos personified as women. Bernard Silvestris, for instance, describes in his *Cosmographia* how the female *Noys* emanates from God, Nature from *Noys*, and *Silva* from Nature. Claire Fanger notes “how deeply issues of gendered embodiment are implicated Bernard’s lofty abstractions, in his considerations of the relations between divinity and the world.”³⁶ *Noys*, *Natura*, and *Silva* are female because they represent the diversification of the primal unity, which is itself eternal and motionless. The higher principle, the “immobile unity of Being,” is represented as the masculine principle, while the lower principle stands for “plurality and motion,” marked by the imagery of the womb.³⁷ Emanation is described as the process of giving birth. The generative aspect of the divine is feminine because women are associated with procreation and material existence.

Another hypothesis building on these ideas comes from Gordon

36. Claire Fanger, “The Formative Feminine and the Immobility of God: Gender and Cosmogony in Bernard Silvestris’s *Cosmographia*,” in *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology In Twelfth-century Latin*, ed. David J. Townsend and Andrew J. Taylor (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 80-101, 82.

37. Fanger, 92.

Teskey. Wondering why personification reverses the gender hierarchy by depicting elevated concepts as female, he gives the following explanation: “It seems that by conferring on personifications the feminine gender, matter is surreptitiously raised up from its logical place, which is beneath the lowest species, into the realm of abstractions, giving these something solid to stand on. What is the stuff out of which Shamefastness is made? She is made of her gender.”³⁸ Materializations of abstract concepts take the female form precisely because they take on materiality. When a higher principle descends and clothes itself in materiality, this is depicted as a gendered process: the masculine principle clothes itself in feminine materiality. Teskey connects this to Platonic ideas about male form and female matter: “the project of cultural idealism is typically encoded as the masculine imprinting of a feminine other.”³⁹ So, the male form of the abstract concept imprints itself in formless matter, which is female. Teskey further describes this process in Neoplatonist terms: “feminine agents are both examples of the universals they instantiate and living sources from which those universals cascade into the world.”⁴⁰ So, just as Fanger noticed with regard to the *Cosmographia*, Teskey describes how personifications might be female both because they are emanations and because they give birth to matter *through* the process of emanation. In a footnote, he makes a remark that is similar to what Newman says about male personifications being less real. Teskey observes that male personifications in *The Faerie Queene* “are demonstrably physical, as if to make up for their relative insubstantiality.”⁴¹

Further, notice how the imagery of the female body and especially its reproductive functions are used in this schema to explain cosmological processes. This is an important factor in the functioning of female personifications, which follows from the association of matter with femaleness. As a consequence of their belonging to the material realm, women are not allowed transcendence and are thus reduced to corporality. Paradoxically, however, men’s bodies remain the standard

38. Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 23.

39. Teskey, 23.

40. Teskey, 23.

41. Teskey, 22n31.

“human body,” and women’s bodies are marked as “other.” So, the female body is both “body” itself, as an undifferentiated mass, *and* the “other” body, with marked characteristics. As a consequence, women’s bodies are more value-laden than men’s, both negatively and positively. The female body, then, is a site for symbolism, and its parts carry meaning. Personifications, of which every body part and piece of clothing is read symbolically, can signify various things by means of their female bodies. For instance, giving birth and breastfeeding often serve as metaphors within a personification allegory.

In conclusion, personifications are female because they are material and immanent instances of *abstracta*—materiality and immanence being coded as feminine—and also because women’s bodies are more marked and value-laden than men’s and are therefore more readily used in symbolic configurations.

Relationality and Gender Roles

Second, I will discuss the implications of women’s place in relation to men within the hierarchy of gender. Women and their bodies are classified according to their sexual and familial roles in relation to men. The female gender of personifications therefore also or even primarily functions in relation to the imagery of sexual relations and familial ties, duties, and honor. Female personifications play the same role here as women in the patriarchal family. Women link men to each other, first, by reproducing the family and connecting men through blood ties,⁴² and, second, by representing the honor of the men to which they belong. Just so, personifications connect humans and the divine or humans mutually through family relationships, and they symbolize the family honor.

There are many different constellations in which female personifications may fulfil this function. Personifications can relate individuals or groups to each other or to God. Mostly, these relations are hierarchical.

42. As described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: Mouton, 1949), and from a feminist perspective by Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

They also often involve implied third parties, who define the relationship by being excluded from it. The personification functions either as a mediator or as a substitute: either she mediates between the parties and is herself related to both of them, or a whole group is united in her person. She can also be both at the same time. The personification can take on many roles, but the most important seem to be mother, daughter, and bride/loved. I distinguish three general attitudes toward these personifications: they are honored, desired, and/or victimized. These reflect the attitudes that courtly literature exhibits towards women. Therefore, the literature on gender in courtly literature is of use in analyzing medieval female personifications. As in courtly literature, the family that is evoked is part of elite culture. Together with gender, this aspect is crucial to the functioning of female personifications. The personifications are not only female, but also of noble lineage. They demand respect and honor, and when their honor is endangered, this evokes serious anxiety and can have repercussions. However, they receive this honor through their relation to their male relatives, to whom they are subordinate. Thus, personifications make use of “the leverage that women had not as people, but as a conceptual category,” in the words of Daisy Delogu.⁴³ The hierarchies of gender and class converge in these figures in order to transfer these hierarchies to all kinds of interpersonal or intergroup relations. As Delogu explains: “The gender binary that has pervaded thought and culture from the Middle Ages to our own times provides a ready-made and almost universally accepted hierarchy which can be deployed in a range of other contexts to express ideas about the respective situations of persons or groups.”⁴⁴ Female personifications “structure relationships of inclusion and exclusion, establish hierarchies, and help to define both self and other.”⁴⁵

We will first look at how personifications might be used in order to define the self in relation to the divine. Humans are sometimes pictured in direct relation to the divine, but more often the relation is mediated by a female figure such as Mary or female personifications. And even when there is a direct relation, we notice the tendency to picture

43. Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*, 14.

44. Delogu, 43.

45. Delogu, 43.

this relation as one between a feminine and a masculine being. Either the human soul is described as Christ's bride or God's child, or Christ is feminized and takes on the role of a mother, in order to relate the human to God as a father. There certainly is a tendency not to relate a male human figure to the (ultimately male) divinity.

Rosemary Radford Ruether has suggested two reasons why men "continually reinvented the 'religious feminine.'"⁴⁶ Her overview of divine female figures throughout history, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, reaches the conclusion that such concepts were probably always invented to serve male interests. The first interest they served, according to Ruether, is to provide a way out of the dilemma that "a male monotheistic God and heterosexual culture" posed to men: "for males to love God meant that a human male must love a divine male."⁴⁷ This would mean an "explicit elaboration of male-male eros," which in such a culture would be forbidden.⁴⁸ I think that this argument cannot hold: for reasons that I will not expand upon here, it is not possible to speak of hetero- and homosexuality in premodern periods.⁴⁹ Instead, I would argue that these relations are male-female more because of the structure and hierarchy of gender as discussed earlier. In relation to the man, woman is subordinated, but all humans together are the woman in relation to God. "Masculine" and "feminine" are then used as a metaphor for "higher" or "stronger" or "more spiritual" versus "lower" or "weaker" or "less transcendent." Medieval sexuality was thus seen less in the absolute terms of two opposite sexes than in the relation between the higher principle of masculinity and the lower principle of femininity (embodied by men and women) that are necessarily bound up with each other as a sign of both human fallenness and redemption. So, because the relation

46. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 303.

47. Ruether, 304.

48. Ruether, 304.

49. See David M. Halperin, "Is there a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory* 28, no.3 (1989): 257-74, doi:10.2307/2505179; James A. Schultz, "Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no.1 (2006): 14-29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4617242>; Helmut Puff, "Same-Sex Possibilities," in Bennett and Karras, *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender*, 379-95.

between humans and the divine is a hierarchical relation, it is described in gendered terms, gender being perceived as the primary hierarchy. For instance, the fact that the soul is not only likened to a bride but also to a child indicates that this is not about “eros,” but about love and care within a relationship of unequal power characterized by dependence.⁵⁰

Ruether gives a second reason why men would invent goddesses. Referring to the goddesses of the ancient Near East, she argues that they protect men in power.⁵¹ Indeed, the relation of certain individuals or groups to the divine, through female mediators or by representing the group itself as a personification, can be employed to legitimate and preserve the power of those individuals or groups.⁵² In this case, the personification serves to relate people to each other rather than to God. Or rather, it sets off people against each other by relating some more closely to God than others. This construction serves two functions in society. First, it legitimizes existing power relations and the position of powerful groups in society by relating them to the divine. Second, the construction is used to demarcate the boundaries between groups and prohibit transgressions.⁵³

50. See Caroline Walker Bynum, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no.3,4 (1977): 257-84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509631>. Bynum remarks that “[b]oth in references to earthly authority figures and in reference to God, a maternal image is an image of dependence or union or incorporation” (269). She further mentions that “sexually inverted images (i.e., calling men “women”) were part of a larger pattern of using inverted language to express personal dependence and the dependence of one’s values on God” (272).

51. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, 303-4.

52. For instance, Hannah W. Matis, “Early-Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs and the Maternal Language of Clerical Authority,” *Speculum* 89, no.2 (2014): 372-73, describes how Carolingian clerics identified themselves with (body parts of) the bride of *Song of Songs*, whom they interpreted as a maternal figure, in order to legitimize and heighten their authority. By representing themselves as the mother-figure in relation to the *parvuli* or children, they both excluded the laity and manipulated power relations within their own ranks.

53. For instance, David Nirenberg, “Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain,” *American Historical Review* 107, no.4 (2002): 1065-93, doi:10.1086/532664, shows how in the literature of medieval Spain, sexual relations of any nature between Christian women and Jewish or Muslim men were depicted

An important precedent for this kind of medieval personifications is the Old Testament's depiction of the Israelites as God's beloved bride, which David Carr calls a "theological marriage matrix": "In this matrix the believing community is depicted as the female spouse of the male god—called on to love that God with the exclusive love of a wife and punished for failure to do so."⁵⁴ Christians replaced the figure of Synagoga with Ecclesia but kept this tradition, as witnessed by the interpretations of the Song of Songs as a love song between the Church and God.⁵⁵ Although interpretations of the Song of Songs put the emphasis on desire and love, elsewhere the "theological marriage matrix" draws on gender roles such as the requirement of absolute faithfulness from the wife and the man's dominance over her. The people are represented as female, then, because of the hierarchy and familial duties that exist between them and God.

But a figure such as the Church does not only enable a group of people to enter into a relationship with God: they also, as individuals, enter into a relationship with the figure of the Church itself. Personifications of groups of people also connect the people in that group to each other and against other groups via the figure of personification, and in this process gender plays an important role. This aspect of female personification allegory has not received much attention for the medieval period, but it has from theorists of the modern nation-state.⁵⁶ I believe that the

as the violation of the brides of Christ and the daughters of God and their violation as the violation of God's rights. Conversely, there are the narratives in which pagan women are converted to Christianity and marry Christian men, which is depicted as a victory of one group over another, as in Sharon Kinoshita, "Pagans Are Wrong and Christians Are Right: Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no.1 (2001): 79-111.

54. David Carr, "Gender and the Shaping of Desire in the Song of Songs and Its Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no.2 (2000): 239, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3268485>.

55. Friedrich Ohly, *Hobeliend-Studien: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Hobeliendauslegung des Abendlandes bis um 1200* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1958); E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Ann Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

56. Nira Yuval-Davis, "Gender and Nation," in *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism*:

core of these ideas could be applied to medieval personifications such as the Church too. Mrinalini Sinha lists four ways in which familial and gendered imagery—the nation as a “domestic genealogy”—functions in a nationalist discourse. First, the imagery represents the nation “as an innate or organic community” whose members are related by family ties, which naturalizes the state and its power over the citizens.⁵⁷ Second, the nation represented as a relative can activate “instrumental passions”:

Thus the nation in the form of an abused or humiliated mother appeals to her sons and daughters, albeit often in differently gendered ways, to come to her protection and restore her honor. Similarly, the nation as fatherland calls upon its sons and daughters to obey the father and fulfil their respective gendered duties to the nation. . . . Most often, perhaps, the nation is represented as a female body—“to love, to possess, and to protect”—in the discourse of nationalism.⁵⁸

Third, the imagery naturalizes hierarchies both within and between nations and signifies “hierarchy within unity”: the message is that hierarchies in and between groups of people are natural and benefit everyone, just as, within a patriarchal family, parents have power over children and husbands over wives.⁵⁹ Fourth, the nation’s double role as a “force for both change and continuity” is negotiated via gender difference: women are identified with tradition and continuity and men with change and modernity.⁶⁰ This description of how gendered imagery functions in establishing relations between people and groups is applicable to medieval collective personifications too. The figure of the Church as a mother establishes the community of Christians as an organic community in which the members are bound to each other by family ties. Second, by, for instance, depicting her as a mother who is in need of help or whose

The Politics of Transition, ed. Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller (London: Routledge, 1998); Mrinalini Sinha, *Gender and Nation* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2006).

57. Sinha, *Gender and Nation*, 17.

58. Sinha, 18.

59. Sinha, 19.

60. Sinha, 21.

honor is threatened, this imagery may be used to activate instrumental passions. A man's honor is then made dependent on the sexual honor of the women that belong to him.⁶¹ Third, it naturalizes hierarchies, both between groups, as we see in the figure of the personified Synagogue, who represents the Jews but is superseded by the Church,⁶² and within groups, as we see for instance when the clergy identifies itself with the mother figure in order to claim natural authority over the laity.⁶³

Daisy Delogu's recent book *Allegorical Bodies: Power and Gender in Late Medieval France* discusses in detail the use of the allegory of France and the allegory of the University of Paris during the Hundred Years War. These are personifications that mediate between political groups and the figure of the king. First, Christine de Pizan creates the maternal figure of France, whose children are in conflict with their mother and among themselves. Delogu explains how "imagining Libera as a maternal figure imposes a bond of natural love among her children, and between the children/subjects and the kingdom."⁶⁴ The French are thus admonished to fulfil their civil duties as loyally as they would their filial duties. Delogu further hypothesizes that the allegorical figure of France should serve as an alternative for the figure of the king, whose "historical and textual absence" at that time prompted Christine de Pizan to "construct an alternative site or mechanism for the production of political and social identity."⁶⁵ Second, Jean Gerson makes use of conventional notions of the family as well by creating the allegorical figure of the University as "the devoted and obedient *fille du roy*."⁶⁶ The allegory of the University allows Gerson to "construct a platform for

61. See Nirenberg, "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation."

62. On the figure of Synagoga in medieval art, see Sara Lipton, "The Temple is my Body: Gender, Carnality, and Synagoga in the 'Bible Moralisée,'" in *Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other: Visual Representation and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period*, ed. Eva Frojmovic (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 129-63; Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

63. Bynum, "Jesus as Mother"; Matis, "The Maternal Language of Clerical Authority."

64. Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*, 73.

65. Delogu, 16.

66. Delogu, 16.

political action for himself, and for the University masters generally,” but because University is a daughter, she poses no threat to the king’s authority.⁶⁷ Gerson’s University is both the king’s daughter and the mother of the masters and students. In this last function, she aids the *translatio studii et imperii*: “Just as real women served as instruments in the transfer of secular power, so too the female-gendered University reproduces knowledge, ensuring its transmission from one generation to the next.”⁶⁸ Delogu thus finds that these personifications “conform to normative expectations of femininity for medieval women.”⁶⁹ They appear as the courtly beloved, as the object of affection and desire, or as a mother. Sometimes, they are depicted as a victimized woman: “By portraying France as a damsel in distress, the authors of such allegorical fictions invite a masculine, and in particular chivalric, public to come to the aid of the kingdom, in accordance with medieval expectations of masculinity.”⁷⁰ It is only medieval women *of the nobility*, however, who can play this role: these women often functioned as intermediaries at courts, and so do personifications.⁷¹

One last instance should be mentioned to round off our overview of the literature on this aspect of female personifications. Emily C. Francomano’s book *Wisdom and her Lovers* mentions Augustine’s use of the personification of Wisdom represented as “a lover who can be shared among male philosophers joined in their pursuit of enlightenment.”⁷² She “strengthen[s] the homosocial and spiritual bonds among philosophers,” thereby again representing the process of *translatio studii*.⁷³ She also offers a surrogate for a human spouse. Francomano perceives a

67. Delogu, 16.

68. Delogu, 87.

69. Delogu, 8.

70. Delogu, 8.

71. See Schiebinger, “Feminine Icons,” 684. Schiebinger, talking about the female personifications of Science in the early-modern period, says: “The feminine icon was born and bred within elite culture, and I would argue that it represented women’s place in that culture more than it did real women of the past. Women’s role in the court and salon was one of mediation.”

72. Emily C. Francomano, *Wisdom and Her Lovers in Medieval and Early-Modern Hispanic Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

73. Francomano, 3-4.

tension in the combination of “the homosocial hermeneutics of wisdom literature and the imagined heterosocial and heterosexual relationships that men in search of Wisdom forge with her.”⁷⁴ This triangular relationship between men and a desired woman, however, is described in feminist theory by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book *Between Men*.⁷⁵ The rupture of the continuum between nonsexual and sexual male bonds is disguised by positing the figure of a desired female; in other words, male philosophers’ relations with each other must be mediated by a female figure in order to banish the idea of sexual relations between *themselves*. This framework could also prove useful for female personifications. The main interest of Francomano’s book, however, is the “deep-seated anxiety about potential confusion between feminine imagery and real, extratextual women.”⁷⁶ Authors who make use of the female personification of Wisdom feel very acutely that they cannot at the same time make use of the feminine and avoid associating Wisdom with mere mortal women. Because of the fact that a female personification “look[s] like a woman, nurture[s] like a mother, sing[s] like a siren, please[s] like a bride, and share[s] her body like a common woman”—in short: answers to all the expectations of normative femininity—that she inevitably will be confused “with real, extratextual women.”⁷⁷

The Level of the Personified: Ideas

The functioning of female personification at the literal level thus revolves around corporality and gender roles. First, women are associated with corporality and earthly existence. Personification, the embodied form of an abstract concept, is female because embodiment is coded as female. Second, women are seen in relation to men. They structure and symbolize relations and hierarchies between people. Female personifications too perform these female gender roles. So, to the question of why these concepts are materialized as female, the answer is that they are because

74. Francomano, 2.

75. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

76. Francomano, *Wisdom and Her Lovers*, 2.

77. Francomano, 3.

materiality itself is coded as female and because they mediate between humans and the divine, as well as between humans mutually, which is the symbolic function of women. The second question is now whether the concepts themselves are coded as female even when they are not materialized.

Here, the principle of immanence returns. A personification is characterized by immanence because in its human form it is part of earthly existence. But many immaterial concepts like Wisdom or the Church are characterized by immanence themselves, because they refer to the divine at work in the creation, the non-transcendent and therefore feminine features of the divine. Barbara Newman notes with regard to Hildegard of Bingen that “while masculine imagery of the Creator tends to stress God’s transcendence, feminine metaphors place the accent on immanence.”⁷⁸ Similarly, personifications represent the workings of a transcendent God in his creation: *Sapientia*, *Caritas*, *Ecclesia* and the others are, in their most elevated form, emanations of God that are at the same time divine and active in people. Therefore, their immanence is best represented by the female form. As such, they become mediators between God and his creation: “Hildegard saw [the feminine] as the dimension in which mediation or, at a higher intensity, union between Creator and creature can be achieved.”⁷⁹ Newman further connects this mediating function to specifically feminine modes of time: “The feminine designations . . . evoke God’s interactions with the cosmos insofar as they are timeless or perpetually repeated.”⁸⁰

Simone de Beauvoir provides another argument: “Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity; that is why almost all allegories in

78. Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 64. See also María Isabel Flisfisch, “Las figuras femeninas en la *Symphonia* de Hildegard de Bingen: Caritas, Sapientia y Ecclesia,” *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 62 (2003): 127–44.

79. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 45.

80. Newman, 45. Newman then goes on to argue that the principles of the feminine divine—theophany, exemplarity, immanence, and synergy—can be seen as conditions of the Incarnation, which in Hildegard’s view is “an event beyond time and history in the sphere of the eternal, of the feminine divine” (46).

language as in pictorial representation, are women.”⁸¹ In other words, if concepts are external to man, they are pictured as feminine because they are Other, even if they represent partly transcendental ideals.

With regard to the personifications that represent collectivities such as a city, a nation, or a religious community, we can add that the figure of a woman also represents the concept of collectivity itself. The female is the marked gender, so that men are more easily perceived as individuals (depending on the intersections with ethnicity, religion, class, etc.), but women are always also perceived as a collective.⁸² Arguably, a male personification would be viewed more as an exemplar, a historical figure, or an autonomous power, but less as a collective entity or abstract concept.⁸³ Inasmuch as women are “the Other,” they are less differentiated, and inasmuch as they are the object to the male subject, they are granted less individuality, so that they can more easily be turned into symbols.

The most comprehensive work on female personifications to date, Barbara Newman’s *God and the Goddesses*, follows this line of thought, but situates its arguments exclusively on the figural level. Newman is opposed to looking at female personifications merely as grammatical or literary figures. She pleads for considering their theological and spiritual meaning. In doing so, however, she separates spiritual meaning from social meaning and claims in effect that the two exclude each other. I want to argue that they do not and that the figural level of

81. de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 211.

82. For instance, Hrabanus Maurus’s ninth-century *De Rerum Naturis* links figures from the Old Testament to the New and figures from both to all sorts of individuals or groups that play a role in salvation history. A quick scan of these typologies reveals that men are mostly seen as prefigurations of Christ, the devil, or groups of individuals such as priests, the apostles, or the prophets, while women are predominantly interpreted as the Church, the Synagogue, souls, or abstract concepts. Hrabanus Maurus, *B. Rabani Mauri Fuldensis Abbatis Et Moguntini Archiepiscopi: Opera Omnia*, ed. J.-P Migne (1864-1878; repr. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966).

83. Schiebinger, “Feminine Icons.” Schiebinger discusses the decline of female personifications of science at the beginning of the nineteenth century and their replacement by images of individual male scientists. Compare also the figures of *Natura* and *Genius* in Alan of Lille’s *De planctu naturae* and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la rose*: while *Natura* is a personification of the concept of Nature, *Genius* is a representative of the priesthood, not a personification of it.

personifications can be traced back to the literal level. First, I will briefly reproduce Newman's argument. She describes the "allegorical goddesses" as a "third pantheon," besides the saints and the old pagan gods, surrounding the monotheistic God of Christendom.⁸⁴ She argues that female personifications "add an irreducible fourth dimension to the spiritual universe. As emanations of the Divine, mediators between God and the cosmos, embodied universals, and not least, ravishing objects of identification and desire, the goddesses substantially transformed and deepened Christendom's concept of God, introducing religious possibilities beyond the ambit of scholastic theology and bringing them to vibrant imaginative life."⁸⁵ They derive their power from representing the "feminine aspect of God": as women, they represent the aspect of reality that is earthly (emanated) and embodied, and as such they can function as mediators and objects of desire.⁸⁶ The way in which Newman describes the functioning of female personifications thus corresponds to the arguments described in the previous section of this paper. However, for her, the fact that allegorical goddesses are idealized figures representing theological concepts means that they do no longer represent women: they are "female but not necessarily women."⁸⁷ She asserts that female personifications are not representations of women but modes of religious imagination. They offer a safe and efficient way to theologize about divine concepts, for instance because they can represent "God's inner conflicts, so to speak, in much the same way that allegory enabled them to dramatize human conflicts."⁸⁸ Another reason for their existence would be the need to imagine divinity as both male and female, because "human beings come in two sexes."⁸⁹ She therefore insists that they "were not women: they did not have bodies, and although they were symbolically virgins, lovers, mothers, and brides, they bore no taint of mortal frailty."⁹⁰ Newman wants to separate positive feminine

84. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 1.

85. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 2-3.

86. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, xvii.

87. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 38.

88. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 39.

89. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 19.

90. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 310.

symbolism from the often negative way that real women's bodies and roles were perceived in society. She never specifies what she means by "female" and by "women" in separating the two, unless by pointing out that "Lady Philosophy suffers from no weakness of mind; Lady Poverty, though beautiful and nude, arouses no lust in St. Francis; Mater Ecclesia does not lack authority, nor is Frau Minne periodically unclean."⁹¹ These are all the negative aspects associated with women's materiality as opposed to men's more spiritual status: women are weak of mind, their bodies are unclean and arouse lust, and they lack authority. This is the view of women that arises when the gendered body and soul are seen in opposition to each other, and these are the qualities that do not get figuratively transferred to men in the symbolic realm. The aspects of the feminine that qualify for that realm are the aspects that are valued when body and soul are seen as a harmonic whole: in that case, the abstract concepts of the body, of complementarity, of erotic love, of gender roles can be used in the religious imagination. What Newman means is that it is possible to abstract women's association with immanence and materiality from women's lower place in society. I do not think that such an artificial separation can be maintained. What is actually valued in abstracted concepts such as materiality or motherhood is the celebration of the lower principle that upholds the higher principle, a celebration of the hierarchy itself. Women's base materiality, on the one hand, and female symbolic materiality, on the other, are two sides of the same coin. It is the same system looked at from different perspectives: if one looks at women as opposed to men, one only discerns negativity, but if one zooms out and considers how women are necessary to men's existence in providing the material from which they are formed, this might be considered positive. Therefore, I would contest the view that we can separate positively valued femininity from negatively valued femaleness, although this may have been what medieval authors tried to do. Newman says that the goddesses have no bodies. However, they signify positive female characteristics by being female: their body is the symbol by which they communicate their meaning. Also, when female symbols are transferred to men, we often see that they remain

91. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 310.

associated with women's bodies, for instance when Christ takes on the role of a mother by being depicted with lactating breasts. Elsewhere, men are connected with female symbols because they deliberately want to take up a lower place in the hierarchy or they want to be able to relate to God as a woman to a man, meaning that traditional gender roles are implicated in these symbols. Even when authors stress positive female symbolism, this happens within a system that opposes female to male, and that values male over female. Female symbols do not stand on their own, and gender relations are also at work in the religious imagination. So, the figural level of personifications builds on the literal level; the concepts themselves have feminine associations, but this is rooted in the literal level and the female bodies of personifications.

The Level of the Personification: Literary Figures

If we look at personification as a literary figure, we again find the same gendered concepts that make plausible the choice for female personifications. Whether personification is seen as a literary figure that has to be interpreted, as a figure that contributes to memorization, as an instance of figurative language, as a trope, or as allegory, the discourse for talking about it makes use of gendered conceptualizations.

Daisy Delogu draws attention to how “the very processes of allegorical writing and reading are imagined by their practitioners in gendered terms.”⁹² Allegorical reading was a “generative process” in which the male exegete drew meaning from the fecund body of the text.⁹³ Furthermore, the allegorical text was frequently described as veiled, “and it was the object of the (again male) reader to strip allegory of its covering, to lay bare and possess allegory’s hidden meaning.”⁹⁴

Emily Francomano, given her focus on the personification of Wisdom, chooses to focus on the role of female personification in the arts of memory, which “implicitly valued this supposed incongruence between the material and the spiritual, the sensual and the intellective.”⁹⁵ As she

92. Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*, 19.

93. Delogu, 19.

94. Delogu, 19.

95. Francomano, *Wisdom and Her Lovers*, 5. See also 11–26.

puts it, “[t]he opposition between *woman* and *wisdom* makes the personification all the more memorable.”⁹⁶ Moreover, because wisdom is figuratively seen as “the body of desired knowledge,” it takes on the form of the desired female body.⁹⁷ In this capacity, the personification offers both an emotional and an erotic stimulation to memorize her teachings.

More broadly, the Jewish Platonist Philo and the Christian Platonist Origen connected the literal level of the text with the body of the reader and the figural level with the soul.⁹⁸ If the body is coded as female, then the literal level can be thought of as female. The outer appearance and gender of the personification are situated on the literal level. We can then not only connect the female body of the personification *as* a body to femaleness, but also connect the literal level of the allegory *through* the metaphor of the body to femaleness.

James Paxson offers a similar argument on personification as a trope. He discusses how “personified characters in classical or early medieval literature were women because Personification as a concept (and itself personified) could be thought of as having the gendered qualities of the feminine.”⁹⁹ First, tropes and figuration in general were characterized as feminine because women were associated with “ornamentation, seduction, excess” and with masking, dressing up, concealing, and translating.¹⁰⁰ Woman stands for the non-transcendent aspect of reality, for the visible outer layer of an invisible reality (sometimes considered positively as an emanation, sometimes negatively as a concealment). Woman thus becomes a metaphor for figuration itself. Second, personification is “the figure of figuration,” too, because “[i]t is always already constituted according to the imaginary features of concealment, clothing, cosmetics, facades, and so forth. These descriptive concepts hinge on the structural

96. Francomano, 5.

97. Francomano, 5.

98. David Dawson, “Plato’s Soul and the Body of the Text in Philo and Origen,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 89–108.

99. Paxson, “Personification’s Gender,” 157.

100. Paxson, 168. See also Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*: “The practice of allegory was also connected to a certain indeterminacy, instability, or multiplicity of meaning, suggesting that allegory, like woman, might be fickle or duplicitous” (19).

oppositions of insides/outside, substrates/surfaces, unseen/seen, content/form, primary/secondary.”¹⁰¹ Tropes work by means of concealment and covering; because both personification and woman are metaphors for denoting this process, personifications take on female shape.

The discourse on the concept of allegory is governed by the same metaphors. First, in Neoplatonist thought, allegory itself was seen as a form of emanation. The fifth-century Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus believed that literary texts offer indirect access to a higher level of reality through allegory. According to Peter Struck, this “view of the One as an entirely transcendent entity that also still (somehow) manifests itself in visible, tangible, concrete reality, sets out a paradox that is a natural incubator of allegorical thinking.”¹⁰² Indeed, this way of thinking provided one of the foundations of the medieval understanding of allegory, mostly through the immensely popular reception in Western Europe of the works of Dionysius the Aeropagite, who might have been a student of Proclus. So, if allegory could be seen as a process of emanation, it could be affected by the discourse on emanation as a process of feminine engendering out of the masculine immobile principle. Female personifications, then, are female because they are emanations at three levels: at the level of the personifier, because they are embodied; at the level of the personified, because they represent immanent concepts; and lastly at the level of the personification figure, because allegory itself is a form of emanation.

Second, the structure of allegory, in Daisy Delogu’s words, is “predicated upon a sustained and productive tension between form and meaning, as well as upon a state of ontological alienation.”¹⁰³ Paxson says the same when he declares that personification involves “the radical suspension of fixed ontic categories such as bodily/abstract, human/non-human or living/non-living.”¹⁰⁴ According to him, this rhetorical subversion then spreads to the ontic category female/male. In Delogu’s account, the “ontological alienation” that characterizes (personification) allegory “allows us to perceive a parallel between allegory and

101. Paxson, “Personification’s Gender,” 172.

102. Struck, “Allegory and Ascent,” 59.

103. Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*, 15.

104. Paxson, “Gender Personified,” 164.

women, themselves often cast, like allegory, as useful, but potentially untrustworthy, intermediaries.”¹⁰⁵ This reminds us of Barbara Newman’s hypothesis that “Christians, accustomed to thinking of God as three-yet-one, of Christ as God-yet-man, and of Mary as virgin-yet-mother, came to regard paradox itself as a touchstone of revealed truth,” and therefore saw the embodiment of a divine concept in female form as such an absurdity that it must be true.¹⁰⁶ However, as Emily Francomano’s book about the literary reception of and responses to the female personification of Wisdom shows, when readers took notice of the incongruity between divine concept and female form—and they very often did—this was “a source of continual anxiety.”¹⁰⁷ She finds repeated warnings not to confuse female personifications with real women. Therefore, I do not think that we must have recourse to the concept of paradox as such to explain the seeming illogicality of female personifications. I would suggest that it is not so much subversion that dictates personification’s gender as it is the association of femaleness with the corporeal and non-transcendent aspects of being human. This association, of course, although not paradoxical in itself, does give rise to paradox because it necessarily has to be denied in order for the exalted personification to function. Personifications derive their effectiveness from taking the place of women in the symbolic order, but any associations with negatively perceived elements of femaleness must be banned. The two cannot be separated, however, which causes the anxiety that Francomano has documented.

Conclusion

Personifications cannot be reduced to either grammatical figure or theological concept. The gender of personifications, then, cannot be reduced to either grammatical gender or ideational value. When it is personified, a concept assumes human shape and a human identity, which entails social identity and gender. Many scholars have contributed arguments about the female gender of personifications. Those arguments that build

105. Delogu, *Allegorical Bodies*, 15.

106. Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 323.

107. Francomano, *Wisdom and Her Lovers*, 6.

on gender theory can be situated on three levels, namely the personifier, the personified, and the personification figure. I have given an overview of these arguments and suggested that the same principles return on all three levels and are grounded in the meanings accorded to female bodies and gender roles. The central concepts are alterity and relativity: women are defined as the “other” in relation to men. The masculine is either invisible and neutral or it is positive; the feminine is either negatively or positively defined in relation to the masculine. So, even when feminine qualities are valued, they are valued in the hierarchical relation to male qualities, which means that they are valued either for their otherness or for their complementarity. First of all, because men are associated with transcendence, women are associated with corporality, materiality, and immanence. Therefore, the material shape of personifications is female. Second, because the male body is seen as the standard body, the female body is marked and offers strong symbolic possibilities. Third, women’s otherness defines their roles in society: they are seen in relation to men and hierarchically subordinated to them. The functioning of personifications in relation to humans and the divine is also governed by the principles of relationality and hierarchy. On the level of the personified, the same principles of immanence, otherness, and collectivity play a role, as well as the principles of hierarchy and relationality. Personifications may represent aspects of the divine, in which case these principles are idealized and elevated, but they are grounded in the same social system that relegates women to the lower place in the hierarchy. Finally, on the level of personification as a literary figure, we again encountered the principles of embodiment and materiality. The choice for female personifications is governed by a complex interplay of factors: by grammar, by the ideational value of the personified concept, and by the dominant literary discourse. What unites all these factors, however, is the one deciding factor: female personifications make use of the symbolic values of female bodies and the structure of gender in society, on the level of the personifier, on the level of the personified, and the personification figure. The conclusion must be that in becoming human, personifications become fully human. Female personifications, then, are not only female but also women.

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