

“Calling [herself] Eleanor”: Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case

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ON DECEMBER 11, 1394, “John Britby of the county of York and John Rykener, calling [herself] Eleanor, having been detected in women’s clothing,” were brought before John Fressh, Mayor and Alderman of the City of London.¹ Britby and Rykener had been found the previous Sunday “lying by a certain stall in Soper’s Lane committing that detestable, unmentionable and ignominious vice”—sodomy. The late fourteenth-century manuscript regarding the case documents not only Britby’s testimony of his encounter with Rykener, but also a more extensive testimony from Rykener herself, including her sexual and employment history. Scholars have tended to discuss the Rykener case within the context of male–male sexual relations, particularly sodomy.²

1. Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, “‘*Ut cum mulier*’: A Male Transvestite in Fourteenth-Century London,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99–116. Karras and Boyd originally published their translation of the Rykener document, along with a brief discussion of the case in “The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1995): 459–65. All direct quotes from the court proceedings are from Karras and Boyd’s translation published in *Premodern Sexualities*, 111–12.

2. Judith M. Bennett, “England: Women and Gender,” in *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. S. H. Rigby (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 87–106; Carolyn Dinshaw, “Good Vibrations: John/Eleanor, Dame Alys, the Pardoner, and Foucault,” in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 102–42; Ruth Evans, “The Production of Space in Chaucer’s London,” in *Chaucer and the City*, ed. Ardis Butterfield

Indeed, the document's original translators, Ruth Karras and David Boyd, argue that the case "stands practically alone for medieval England as a description of same-sex intercourse as well as male transvestism."³ In making this argument, Karras and Boyd maintain that Rykener is a *man* in women's clothing who engaged in same-sex intercourse. Other scholars have repeated this claim. Yet, Karras and Boyd also acknowledge that Rykener "was feminine" and "did not fit the expectations of normal masculine behavior (or even criminal behavior) in fourteenth-century English society and culture."⁴

If Rykener was perceived as feminine and did not fit normative masculinity, how should we understand Rykener? This essay contends that Rykener ought to be understood as a transgender woman because she lived and worked for periods of her life as a woman, and other people in her social milieu accepted her as such. More specifically, I argue that Rykener relied on "gender labor"—the labor others perform to inscribe gender—to place herself within the series "women" (a collective of women not reliant on biologically essentialist definitions for membership). By using the framework of gender labor to argue Rykener is a woman, I provide a new way of reading gendered subjectivity—particularly transgender subjectivity—in the archive. Indeed, the historical document—discovered at the top of a 1395 Plea and Memoranda roll at the London Records Office—gives significant space to the various ways in which Rykener lived as a woman.⁵ The most obvious indication of this from the document is the fact that the scribe records that she is brought before Mayor John Fressh wearing women's clothing and insists on "calling [herself] Eleanor" even within a hostile juridical context.⁶

(Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 41-56; Jeremy Goldberg, "John Rykener, Richard II and the Governance of London," *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014): 49-70 (Goldberg reads the Rykener case as satire); Tom Linkinen, *Same Sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 105.

3. Karras and Boyd, "Ut cum mulier," 101.

4. Karras and Boyd, 110.

5. Corporation of London Records Office, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2 (1395). Karras and Boyd note that the other cases which follow are unrelated (111).

6. Because the historical record provides substantial evidence the Rykener lived

Indeed, by making this statement, she strategically—and perhaps even defiantly—inscribes herself into the historical record as a woman. In addition, the document indicates that Eleanor performed many different types of women’s work throughout the course of her life. Although the testimony focuses predominantly on her labor as a sex worker—and this labor has been the focus of most scholarship on the case—it is important to recognize that Eleanor also engaged in other forms of women’s work. For instance, Eleanor worked for an extended period as a tapster: she “confessed that on Friday before the feast of St. Michael [she] came to Burford in Oxfordshire and there dwelt with a certain John Clerk at the Swan in the capacity of tapster for the next six weeks.” It was common during this period for women, often single or widowed, to support themselves financially by working in taverns as alesellers, or tapsters.⁷ Eleanor also “confessed that for five weeks before the feast of

and worked as a woman, I use female pronouns throughout this essay to refer to her. Karras and Boyd opt to use bracketed masculine pronouns in their translation where the pronoun is either missing or of indiscriminate gender because the document only uses a feminine pronoun (her) twice in indirect speech to refer to Rykener. Karras and Boyd explain that they feel it “seems reasonable and consistent to translate the indeterminate pronouns as masculine” because the majority of pronouns used in Latin are masculine (113n19). For example, they translate “se Elianoram nominans,” where “se” as a reflexive pronoun can mean “him/her/it/one-self” as “calling [himself] Eleanor.” I believe that Karras and Boyd may have utilized masculine pronouns, in part, because they wanted to locate the case within the context of sodomy and male-male sexual relations. Yet, the majority of pronouns are, in fact, indiscriminate, not male: of the thirty-five pronouns used in the document, two are feminine (her), thirteen are male (he, him, himself), and twenty are indiscriminate or missing. The overwhelming number of indiscriminate pronouns at least indicates that the scribe recording the case was unclear about how to gender Rykener. I argue, however, that the historical document provides a lot of evidence which suggests that Rykener worked and lived as a woman, and I therefore translate the indiscriminate pronouns in the feminine with brackets. I have chosen to maintain the masculine pronouns as they appeared in the Latin in order to highlight the role we all play in gendering others through the use of pronouns.

7. Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Karras also connects tapsters to sex work, as taverns were often sites where sex workers sought out clients, sometimes working directly with the tavern to get clients; see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford:

St. Michael's last [she] was staying at Oxford, and there, in women's clothing and calling himself Eleanor, worked as an embroideress." This occupation is particularly significant since embroidery and other sewing-based occupations were the quintessential modes of women's labor in the period.⁸

The document further indicates that other people in the period accepted Eleanor as a woman and assisted her in living as such. As I mentioned, John Clerk employed her as a tapster. In addition, the scribe records that Eleanor "swore willingly on [her] soul that a certain Anna... taught him this detestable vice in the manner of a woman" and further testified "that a certain Elizabeth Brouderer first dressed him in women's clothing" and "call[ed] him Eleanor." By discussing her relationship with Anna and Elizabeth, Eleanor indicates that she was part of a community of women who not only accepted her as a woman but helped her live as a woman, providing her with both clothing and a name. In modern terms, we might say that Anna and Elizabeth helped Eleanor socially transition. The historical record documents, therefore, Eleanor's transition and gives glimpses of her life as a transgender woman.

By arguing that Eleanor is a transgender woman I do not mean to imply an "ahistorical equivalency" between trans women today and trans women in the past.⁹ Rather, I pay particular attention to the historical context in which Eleanor lived in order to excavate the ways in which she may have strategically used common understandings of femininity and womanhood of the period to mark herself as a woman. By using

Oxford University Press, 1996), 71-73.

8. E. Jane Burns, *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); E. Jane Burns, "Uncourty Cloth Workers in the Old French Sewing Songs," *Women and Work in Premodern Europe: Experiences, Relationships and Cultural Representation, c. 1100-1800*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell, and Julie Hotchin (New York: Routledge, 2018), 51-70; Gale R. Owen Crocker, "Clothwork, Domestic," *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 150-52; Sarah Randles, "'When Adam Delved and Eve Span': Gender and Textile Production in the Middle Ages," in Bailey, Colwell, and Hotchin, *Women and Work in Premodern Europe*, 71-102.

9. Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici, "Trans, Time, and History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 518-39, 522.

trans as a category of analysis, I am able to read for Eleanor's own voice as authorizing a transgender analysis of her subjectivity as a woman—evidenced most powerfully by the fact that she called herself Eleanor. Moreover, it is important to point out, as Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici do in their introduction to *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly's* special issue on “trans*historicitities,” that “we do not abbreviate all histories of gender simply because past categories accord imprecisely with present ones; we write about women in the distant past even as we acknowledge that premodern subjects dovetail imperfectly with the modern term *woman* (which, of course, few gender studies scholars would characterize as a coherent and intelligible category even now).”¹⁰ Trans as a category of analysis, therefore, opens up “the possibility of writing trans history that precedes the relatively recent coinage of the terms *transsexual* and *transgender*.”¹¹ DeVun and Tortorici point to a number of scholars who have already begun the work of thinking trans historically.

Ruth Karras recently revisited the Rykener case in an article she wrote with Tom Linkinen. They argue that today, “we might understand Rykener as a transgender person rather than as ‘transvestite,’ the term used in [the earlier] article[s].”¹² Karras and Linkinen go on to discuss the various ways in which Rykener engaged in women's work, including sex work, and lived as a woman—they acknowledge that she made “real efforts . . . to perform this social gender role,” thus “indicat[ing] that it was deliberate.”¹³ Yet, despite showing the ways that Rykener intentionally worked and lived as a woman, they do not acknowledge her as such. Instead, they say that she might be viewed as a “transgender *person*” or as “transgender-like.”¹⁴ The use of “person” here has a neutralizing effect, positioning Eleanor as potentially genderqueer/non-binary (gender that is neither strictly male nor female), which is further evidenced by Karras

10. DeVun and Tortorici, 523, original emphasis.

11. DeVun and Tortorici, 523, original emphasis.

12. Ruth Karras and Tom Linkinen, “John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited,” in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 111–21, 111.

13. Karras and Linkinen, 116.

14. Karras and Linkinen, 111–112, emphasis added.

and Linkinen's use of the neutral pronouns *ze/hir*.¹⁵ Indeed, in the conclusion of their essay, they explicitly state that Rykener, “stake[s] out, not a middle position, but a flexible one that went back and forth.”¹⁶ Thus, they position Eleanor, not as a transgender *woman* (as I contend), but as genderqueer/non-binary, and ultimately only “transgender-like.”

Moreover, Karras and Linkinen suggest that in order to “[make] the case” for Rykener as a “transgender person” or as “transgender-like”, we might do so “via fiction,” as Linkinen does in his play/puppet show about Rykener, *John/Eleanor*, and Bruce Holsinger does in his historical novel *A Burnable Book*.¹⁷ This suggestion is troubling, in part, because it seems to downplay the possibility of writing transgender history by implying that transgender lives in the past can best be understood within the realm of fiction. This suggestion also unwittingly replicates the logic whereby transgender people, especially transgender women, are frequently and problematically figured as pretenders or as living “fictional” lives. In other words, it risks perpetuating harmful ideas about transgender people as “evil deceivers and make-believers” in both the past and the present.¹⁸ We do not, however, need to resort to fiction to write Eleanor's history. The historical record indicates that she lived and worked as a woman, and therefore, I believe that it makes sense to think of her as a transgender *woman*.

15. Laura Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 617; Karras and Linkinen, “John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited,” 112. For more on genderqueer and non-binary identities see Mica Rajunov and A. Scott Duane, *Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender and Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker, eds., *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

16. Karras and Linkinen, “John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited,” 121.

17. Karras and Linkinen, 111. In *A Burnable Book*, Holsinger calls Rykener a “swerver,” thus positioning her as genderqueer or non-binary, rather than transgender. Bruce Holsinger, *A Burnable Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2014).

18. For more on the trope of make-believe, see Talia Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43-65.

Seriality and Gender Labor

I use two distinct, yet tightly imbricated, concepts to argue that Rykener is a woman: seriality and gender labor. First, Iris Young has argued that conceptualizing the category of “woman” as a *series* helps us avoid biologically essentialist definitions of sex/gender that are often used to exclude transgender women. Moreover, the concept of seriality allows us to think of Rykener as a woman outside of historical understandings of sex/gender in the medieval period because seriality does not require biological definitions of “woman.” Articulations of Rykener as a *male* transvestite, as opposed to a woman, may have resulted, in part, from previous scholars’ and feminists’ reluctance to reconceive the category “woman” beyond the biological. Indeed, defining the boundaries of the category “woman” has been, and continues to be, a problem plaguing feminist thinkers. I use Young’s concept of series, or seriality, then, to address this problem of conceptualizing women as a single group. Moreover, although there may be “pragmatic political reasons for insisting on the possibility of thinking about women as some kind of group,” Young contends, “the search for the common characteristics of women or of women’s oppression leads to normalizations and exclusions.”¹⁹ What Rykener’s case offers specifically is resistance to the normalization of cisgender, or non-trans, status for women, which thus excludes transgender women from the category “woman.” By assuming that all women are cisgender, meaning that their identity as a woman is in alignment with their sex/gender assigned at birth, cis status becomes compulsory.²⁰ As

19. Iris Young, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective,” *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 3 (1994): 713–38, 713, 714, <https://www-jstor-/stable/3174775>.

20. Compulsory cisgender identity, or cishnormativity, operates in similar ways to Adrienne Rich’s articulation of “compulsory heterosexuality” in that both are seen as the assumed default position, and always political and imbued with power. Indeed, compulsory heterosexuality assumes cishnormativity because cishnormativity mandates that if someone is assigned female at birth, she must identify as a woman, where it is also understood that being a woman, normatively defined, also means she desires men. See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/3173834>. See also Judith Butler’s notion of the “heterosexual matrix”

such, compulsory cisnormativity positions transgender women as Other and outside the category “woman.”²¹ Seriality, by contrast, allows us to “see women as a collective without identifying common attributes that all women have [or must have, such as biology and cis status] or implying that all women have a common identity.”²²

People are brought together into a series by either their “relation to a material object,” or by becoming the object to which others are oriented.²³ Each member of a series may have different actions and goals, and have nothing in common in their experiences, histories, identities, or even body morphology. For example, people gathered at a bus stop constitute the series “bus riders.” As a series, they have the potential for political action if the bus fails to arrive. Their political potential is not reliant on any shared experience, history, identity, or body morphology, but results instead from a shared orientation toward riding the bus. Gender, for Young, is similarly constituted. For instance, there are objects beyond the sexed body that condition women’s lives as gendered: pronouns situate people in gendered systems; cultural representations, both verbal and visual, create and reproduce gendered systems; individuals’ interactions with others and their movement through the world, as well as a vast array of artifacts such as clothing, tools, and even spaces, to name a few, “materially inscribe norms of gender.”²⁴ Furthermore, series are also created through structural relations. One such structure that Young discerns is enforced heterosexuality because “the material practices of enforced heterosexuality serialize women as objects of

as a “grid of intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 194n6.

21. Following the logic of compulsory cisnormativity (and heteronormativity), lesbians are also considered Other because they do not desire men and are therefore outside the category “woman.”

22. Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 714.

23. Young, 725. Young, who is building on the work of Sartre, calls these objects “practico-inert objects.” Objects are practical in that their effects are the result of human action. As material, these objects also “constitute constraints on and resistances to action that make them experienced as inert” (725-26).

24. Young, 724-30.

exchange and appropriation by men.”²⁵ In this way, a series is created through either an orientation toward material objects or by being the very object in which others orient themselves. Within the structure of enforced heterosexuality, women are constituted as a series by way of men’s orientations toward their bodies as material objects available for exchange and sexual appropriation. In turn, the action of exchanging and appropriating women also creates the series “man.” Which is to say, within the structure of enforced, or compulsory, heterosexuality, the series “man” is constituted through men’s mutual orientation toward women as objects of exchange and appropriation, as well as their shared orientation toward gendered objects like clothing, pronouns, gestures, and the sexual division of labor.

Understanding Rykener’s own orientation toward objects, as well as how other people’s orientation toward her helps constitute her as a woman is important because, as Judith Butler points out, “[o]ne is always ‘doing’ [gender] *with or for another*.”²⁶ The various people Rykener engages with, as the result of an orientation toward her, place her in the series woman or help create gender for her through acts of gender labor. As opposed to “gendered labor”—modes of labor that are culturally coded as appropriate for specific genders—sociologist Jane Ward theorizes “gender labor” as “the affective and bodily efforts invested in giving gender to others. . . . Gender labor is the work of bolstering someone’s gender authenticity.”²⁷ As I will show below, Rykener relies on both gendered labor and gender labor to inscribe herself as a woman. Ward identifies three specific forms of gender labor that (in her specific study) femme-identified cisgender women perform in order to help construct trans masculinity: the labor of alliance, the labor of being “the girl,” and the labor of forgetting.

25. Young, 728.

26. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1 (emphasis added).

27. Jane Ward, “Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 236–54, 237, doi:10.1177/1363460709359114. I am indebted to Simone Chess who first introduced me to Ward’s essay and used gender labor as a framework of analysis for close reading literature. See Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

First, the labor of alliance is “one in which both partners, together, create the genders and gendered dynamics that work for them in public and private.”²⁸ As I have already mentioned, several people help Eleanor create her gender by giving her a name and dressing her. Second, the labor of being “the girl,” for Ward, is an act of “intimate labor” that not only “involves embodying feminine contrast (if I am the [girl/woman], then you are the [boy/man]), but also discovering, acknowledging, encouraging, fulfilling, validating, nurturing and initiating masculine complexity.”²⁹ This mode of labor is complicated in the Rykenener case, in part because, as a sex worker, it is her male clients who perform the labor of being “the man” in order to provide a masculine contrast—a point I return to below. Last, through the labor of forgetting, non-trans partners “demonstrate that they have forgotten their [trans] partner’s past [assumed gender] and are not preoccupied with being in a ‘transgender relationship,’ even though their relationship requires particular kinds of work and expectations related to trans identity.”³⁰ According to Simone Chess, the labor of forgetting is “not about denial of misinformation, but rather about manipulating memory to make space for queer and inclusive narratives. . . . In the gendered labor of forgetting, the femme partner knows and understands that her partner is trans*, but actively forgets it, chooses to not know it, in order to coproduce masculinity,” creating “a strange epistemological stance of knowing-unknowing or refusing-to-remember.”³¹ As I will show below, in addition to engaging in gendered labor, Rykenener relied on all three modes of gender labor, albeit in somewhat different ways, in order to enter the series “woman” and inscribe a feminine subjectivity for herself.

Reading Rykenener

One of the most obvious ways in which individuals helped Eleanor co-create her gender is through the labor of alliance. As I noted earlier, two women, Anna and Elizabeth, allied themselves with Eleanor by helping

28. Ward, “Gender Labor,” 140.

29. Ward, 245-46.

30. Ward, 246.

31. Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing*, 140, 141.

her dress and teaching her to have sex as a woman. We know from the court document that the court asked Eleanor who had taught her “to exercise this vice and for how long and in what places and with what persons, masculine or feminine.” The scribe records:

[She] swore willingly on [her] soul that a certain Anna, the whore of a former servant of Sir Thomas Blount, first taught him to practice this detestable vice *in the manner of a woman*. [She] further said that a certain Elizabeth Brouderer first dressed him in women’s clothing; she also brought her daughter Alice to diverse men for the sake of lust, placed her with those men in their beds at night without light, making her leave early in the morning and showing them the said John Rykener dressed up in women’s clothing, calling him Eleanor and saying that they misbehaved with her.³²

The fact that Rykener names Elizabeth as the first who dressed her, according to Karras and Boyd, “indicates that someone else may have suggested the cross-dressing because of the earning opportunities it presented.”³³ This reading has two problems. First, it strips Eleanor of any agency for self-fashioning.³⁴ Regardless of whether or not Eleanor is strongly encouraged by someone else to become a sex-worker, embroideress, or tapster, she makes the deliberate choice to do so. She also uses these occupations strategically to inscribe herself as a woman. Medievalists have extensively shown how the social order of the late medieval period relied on clearly established and reinforced gender roles

32. Karras and Boyd, “*Ut cum mulier*,” 111.

33. Karras and Boyd, 103.

34. It is important to acknowledge that access to agency is not as straightforward as we might think. Eleanor, as a trans woman, would not have had access to either marriage or motherhood, the means by which she would have achieved full womanhood in the medieval period. Thus, she might not have had a choice when turning to sex work or other women’s work, in order to survive. Alina Boyden, personal correspondence with author, 2017. For more on transgender women, agency, and sex work, see Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 199–200; Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 261.

maintained through differences in occupations and dress, as well as mannerisms and even sexual positions.³⁵ Thus, we need to pay particular attention to Eleanor's self-fashioning in this regard. Indeed, Young argues that what structures our gendered relations to, or orientations toward, material objects (such as clothing) is the sexual division of labor—the assignment of labor or tasks to people based on sex/gender.³⁶ Engaging in “women's work,” therefore, would have helped inscribe Eleanor as a woman. Indeed, Eleanor makes no mention of doing any form of “men's” work; instead, she indicates that she consistently decided to perform quintessential forms of women's labor.

Second, suggesting that Elizabeth was only interested in the earning opportunities that arose on account of Eleanor wearing women's clothes obscures the gender labor that both Anna and Elizabeth performed in helping Eleanor become a woman. More specifically, both women performed the labor of alliance. Whereas Ward focuses on the cocreation of gender between trans people and their cis partners, the labor of alliance (and other forms of gender labor) can be enacted by other individuals as well. Anna, for instance, performs the gender labor of alliance by teaching Eleanor how to dress and how to have sex “in the manner of a woman.” Elizabeth performs the labor of alliance by helping Eleanor pass as a woman, as well as calling her Eleanor. And John Clerk of the Swan tavern helps cocreate her gender by hiring her to work as a tapster. Once we consider all of the “collective work” of others that helped Eleanor produce her gender, we see how Eleanor is inscribed within the series woman.³⁷

The second type of gender labor in the Rykener case is the labor of being “the man,” which is performed by Eleanor's clients like John Britby. These men all do the labor of being “the man” and thereby provide a counterpoint to Eleanor's being “the girl.” The scribe records that Britby confessed before the court that while he was traveling through Cheap on Sunday, December 11, between eight and nine in the evening, he encountered Rykener “dressed up as a woman, thinking he was a woman, asking him as he would a woman if he could commit a libidinous

35. Karras and Boyd, “*Ut cum mulier*,” 109.

36. Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 730.

37. Ward, “Gender Labor,” 251.

act with her.”³⁸ Opening the deposition with Britby’s account of his encounter with Eleanor Rykener sets a precedent for claiming her as a woman and understanding her gender as cocreated. First, Britby identifies, even interpellates, Eleanor as a woman when he sees her “dressed up as woman” and addresses her as “a woman.” This initial inscription of her as a woman is further embedded by Britby’s orientation toward Eleanor as an object of exchange and sexual desire when he approaches her “as he would a woman” and asks her “if he could commit a libidinous act with her.” The inscription of Rykener as a woman is further mapped by the text itself with the pronoun transition from masculine to feminine: Britby asks *him* as he would a woman if he can have sex with *her*. That Britby ends his testimony by referring to Eleanor with a feminine pronoun could indicate that he ultimately concludes that she is a woman and accepts her as such. Moreover, as Eleanor’s cisgender sexual partner, Britby supports Eleanor’s identity as a woman through “surface reinforcements” such as pronouns and calling her Eleanor, as well as the “more complex work of actually participating in the production of [his] partner’s gender (through sex acts and roles, through shared gender dynamics, and through the private work of thinking and/or feeling sexual orientation in connection with [her] gender identity).”³⁹ Sex acts, then, are an important component of more complex gender labor.

Thus, Eleanor inscribes herself as a woman by means of her sexual activity with Britby and other cisgender men. In addition to her back-alley sexual exchange with Britby, Eleanor testifies that a “certain Phillip, rector of Theydon Garnon,” had sex with her “as with a woman” at Elizabeth Brouderer’s house outside Bishopsgate, where she also “took away two gowns of Phillip’s.” She further confesses that during her five weeks in Oxford she had sex frequently with “three unsuspecting scholars,” and in Burford of Oxfordshire, where she spent six weeks, she had sex with at least nine men who paid her. Finally, “two foreign Franciscans” had sex with Eleanor “as a woman” in Beaconsfield, and upon returning to London “a certain Sir John, once chaplain of the Church of St. Margaret Pattens, and two other chaplains committed with [her] the

38. Karras and Boyd, “*Ut cum muliere*,” 111.

39. Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing*, 140.

aforementioned vice in the lanes behind St. Katherine's Church by the Tower of London" and that "many priests" had sex with her "as with a woman." In the end, Eleanor explicitly mentions at least four different instances in which men had sex with her "as with a woman."⁴⁰

There is no evidence that formal charges were made against Ryken-er.⁴¹ Based on her confession, however, Eleanor could have been charged as either a prostitute or as a sodomite. According to Karras and Boyd, she was most likely not charged with either of these offenses because of how the categories of prostitution and sodomy were legally applied during the medieval period. For instance, "prostitution was intimately tied up with femininity. . . . A whore was first and foremost a sinful woman, although probably one who happened to take money for her sin. A man who took money for sex did not fall into the same category."⁴² In addition, the accusation of being a sodomite tended to be applied to men who assumed the "penetrative" position when having sex with other men.⁴³ We know from Eleanor's testimony that men had sex with her "as with a woman," which places her in a receptive or "feminine" position. Thus, social understandings of the gendered dynamics of both prostitution and sodomy are important to understanding how gender labor is operating in the sexual engagements between Eleanor and her partners.

Regarding prostitution, we can assume that the court did not (or could not) legally recognize Eleanor as a woman because they did not explicitly charge her with prostitution. Yet, even if the court refused to legally recognize Eleanor's gender, the gendered dynamics of sex work were widely understood by society, and she may have made use of such knowledge in order to further inscribe herself as a woman. First, her orientation toward sex work as an established feminine labor practice places her within the series woman. Second, because she is a sex worker, she is further inscribed in the series woman as an object of exchange and sexual appropriation.

Moreover, sex work was a means through which Eleanor engages

40. Karras and Boyd, "Ut cum muliere," 111-12.

41. Karras and Boyd, 102.

42. Karras and Boyd, 105.

43. Bennett, "England: Women and Gender," 88; Karras and Boyd, 'Ut cum muliere,' 103; Linkinen, *Same Sex Sexuality*, 60.

others, such as John Britby, in acts of gender labor. For instance, the labor of being “the girl,” operates in two ways. First, in Ward’s articulation this labor is usually performed by the cis partner. In Eleanor’s case, cis men perform the labor of being “the boy” in order to inscribe Eleanor as a woman. Thus, for instance, Britby plays the role of “the boy” when he approaches her “as he would a woman.” Second, the labor of being “the girl” is performed by Eleanor, the transgender partner within this dynamic. Dressing in women’s clothing, engaging in prostitution with cisgender men, and taking the receptive position during sex, all work in concert to assist her in the labor of being “the girl” in order to inscribe herself as a woman. Furthermore, the labor of being “the girl” helps inscribe a more proper masculinity for the “sodomite” who solicits sex from her. By approaching Eleanor *as a woman* and having sex with her “as with a woman,” Britby and other men seek to inscribe themselves as *men* as opposed to sodomites. In this way, Eleanor offers “a model of more mutual labor, in which both partners have gendered presentations in need of preservation and both participate in the work of sustaining, maintaining, and giving veracity to each other’s gendered presentations.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, the act of sex itself requires that Eleanor’s partners engage in the labor of forgetting in order to further inscribe her identity as a woman. This is Ward’s third type of gender labor. More specifically, the labor of forgetting requires Eleanor’s partners to forget the contours of her sexed body, as well as the dominant script of sex/gender, in order to understand her as a woman with a penis, alluded to by Britby’s slippage from masculine to feminine pronouns in his testimony. That is, Britby forgets Eleanor’s sexed body and privileges her gender expression in the moment he switches from a masculine to feminine pronoun when referring to her in his confession. Interestingly, Eleanor also confessed that she went to Beaconsfield and “as a man, had sex with a certain Joan.” She also “often had sex as a man with many nuns and also had sex as a man with many women both married and otherwise.” We can read this part of her testimony in two ways. On the one hand, it is possible to read these statements as indicating that Eleanor identified as a man, or

44. Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing*, 153.

at least genderqueer/nonbinary, and desired sex with women because she did not receive payment for sex with them according to her testimony. On the other hand, it is also possible to infer that the language of “as a man” means only that she took a penetrative position during sex with women. It is not clear, for instance, if Eleanor was wearing women’s clothes during her liaisons with women or what she used to penetrate her female partners: her penis, hand, tongue, or possibly even a dildo. We only know from her confession that she took the penetrative position “as a man” would.⁴⁵ Moreover, because she did not receive payment for sex, she may have felt differently about sex with women than sex with men for which she received payment. This opens up the possibility that Eleanor is also a bisexual or lesbian transgender woman.⁴⁶ In this second reading, the women Eleanor has sex with would be performing the labor of forgetting by forgetting Eleanor is a woman with a penis. Indeed, as a mode of knowing-unknowing, the labor of forgetting might enable Eleanor’s female sexual partners to consider her a tribade—a woman with an enlarged clitoris capable of penetrating female sexual partners.⁴⁷ If

45. It is important to note here that contemporary cisnormative ideas about what it means to be a woman mandate that transgender women not only experience body dysmorphia related to having a penis, but that they also do not desire sexual pleasure involving their penis. It is true that some trans women experience significant and debilitating body dysmorphia related to having a penis. It is also true that transgender people experience varying degrees of gender dysphoria and related body dysmorphia, and therefore some trans women may not experience significant, if any, dysmorphia related to having a penis. Indeed, some transgender women derive sexual pleasure from their penis. Furthermore, mandating that trans women undergo gender affirming surgery not only perpetuates a medical model for transgender subjectivity, but also obscures systemic inequalities that prevent transgender women from accessing medical transition, as well as denies transgender women bodily autonomy in self-fashioning their identities as women. Considering the wide range of experiences of transgender women, we should not deny the possibility that Eleanor Rykener can be a woman and still derive pleasure from using her penis for sex with women, regardless of whether medical transition was available or not in the medieval period.

46. Karras and Linkinen also indicate that Rykener might be “the medieval equivalent of a lesbian transwoman” (“John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited,” 116), although they ultimately conclude that she is only transgender-like.

47. See Karma Lochrie, “Before the Tribade: Medieval Anatomies of Female Masculinity and Pleasure,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker

Eleanor's female sexual partners thought of her in this way, they could still be "topped" by her while maintaining her identity as a woman.

Conclusion

By paying closer attention to Eleanor's employment history, including sex work, as well as the actions of the people she worked with and who knew her, we can excavate the various modes of gender labor that people enacted in order to both help her live as a woman and place her within the series "woman" in medieval London. Scholars continue to debate the appropriateness of thinking trans historically. Recovering transgender people in the past, however, is important because it makes our present more livable and envisioning a future more possible for transgender people. Indeed, recovering trans lives in the past feels particularly urgent given the current administration's attempts to erase trans (and intersex) existence through legal means.⁴⁸ Eleanor's testimony stands as a refusal of such erasure. The fact that she calls herself Eleanor in the courtroom and thus in the historical record might be read as a defiant refusal to have her identity erased. And she is not alone in doing this. There are other instances of trans (and intersex) people insisting upon their gender identity in the face of hostile authorities. In colonial Virginia, Thomas (ine) Hall (who we might consider intersex) was brought before the court in 1629 and testified that "hee was *both a man and a woeman*."⁴⁹ Similarly, in 1836, Mary Jones, a black "cross-dressing" sex worker, testified in New York's Court of General Council that she "always attended parties among the people of my own Colour dressed [in women's clothes]—and in New Orleans I always dressed this way."⁵⁰ Finally, in 1851 in Baltimore,

and Aren A. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 335-49.

48. Erica L. Green, Katie Brenner, and Robert Pear, "'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration," *New York Times*, October 21, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2R9WijB>.

49. H. R. McIlwaine, *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia 1622-1632, 1670-1676, with notes and excerpts from original council and general court records, into 1683, now lost* (Richmond, VA: The Colonial Press, Everett Waddey Co., 1924), 194-95, emphasis added.

50. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*

Mary Ann Waters is described as wearing “a dark figured mousseline de laine dress, blue velvet mantilla, white satin bonnet, and figured scarf.” A “fugitive slave” notice about her indicates that she may have been arrested for both sex work and the suspicion that she was a “fugitive” from slavery. She insisted, however, that she was free and that she was a woman who had been “hiring out in the city of Baltimore as a woman for the last three years.”⁵¹ Moreover, like Eleanor who entered the court “calling [herself] Eleanor,” the notice indicates that she “call[ed herself] Mary Ann Waters.”⁵² Thus, the archive documents how Eleanor Rykener, Thomas(ine) Hall, Mary Jones, and Mary Ann Waters all claim their own agency in self-determining their gender, and their testimonies thus resist juridical attempts to erase their identities.

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 60.

51. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 64-65.

52. Snorton, 65. The original “fugitive slave” notice for Mary Ann Waters uses masculine pronouns. Because of her similarities with Rykener regarding an insistence on a feminine name, women’s clothes, and engaging in sex work, I have chosen to use feminine pronouns in brackets.