



Medieval Feminist Forum

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:
Essays on Medieval Literature
from the 2020 Gender and
Medieval Studies Conference



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history, including our interpretations of female patronage and power. I'm looking forward to the moment when this sort of analysis does not need to be scaffolded by rejections of the "exceptionalist assumption," and scholars like Jasperse can focus entirely on their exciting contributions to the field.

Mary Dockray-Miller
Lesley University

<https://doi.org/10.32773/NTXK8799>

Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern, edited by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. viii + 393. ISBN: 9781501759505.

Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern offers compelling evidence that what we now call trans identity is not exclusively the product of a modern, post-Enlightenment consciousness. Rather, gender plurality *as a historically specific phenomenon* appears persistently in premodern texts. The strength of this collection resides in the variety of its approaches to the emerging field of trans studies. Each chapter provides a distinct view of trans figures in premodern literary and historical archives. Moreover, the contributors' vibrant accounts of gender plurality expose the inadequacy of our critical vocabularies for transness now. *Trans Historical* reveals how premodern texts shed new light on historically specific gender formations, and the collection makes rich contributions to trans studies today.

Gender plurality need not be named as such, and this volume observes how people modify or move away from their assigned sex without calling themselves trans. Many of the terms the collection uses—trans included—are the products of twentieth-century medical science, and they evidence the unsettled genealogies of trans studies. *Trans Historical* departs from past queer approaches that maintain the stability of binary gender across time to uncover same-sex desire. Furthermore, the editors suggest that explicitly foregrounding race redefines the priorities of trans studies, a field known for its whiteness. By attending to the writings of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and C. Riley Snorton, the collection recognizes how gender is intimately racialized. While an analysis of racialized gender has informed scholarship in more recent periods, this

collection presents a crucial reassessment of both gender plurality and race in premodern studies.

Three comprehensive topics structure *Trans Historical*. The first section, “Archives: Revisiting Law and Medicine,” asks how medical and legal discourses determine the conditions of possibility for gender plurality. Leah DeVun’s “Mapping the Borders of Sex” examines so-called “monstrous races” that appear in medieval manuscripts of *The Marvels of the East*. DeVun expertly positions a variety of “nonbinary-sexed” figures in relation to intersex and trans identities today (29). Igor H. De Souza’s “Elenx de Céspedes: Indeterminate Genders in the Spanish Inquisition” explores the sixteenth-century legal distinctions between sodomy and hermaphroditism in the case of a mixed-race freed slave. De Souza exposes how inquisitorial accusations of sodomy policed gender expression as well. Kathleen Perry Long’s “The Case of Marin le Marcis” turns to Jacques Duval’s seventeenth-century portrayal of Marin le Marcis, who sought the recognition of his gender through the Catholic Church. Long analyzes Duval’s use of the pronoun “il” and Marin’s chosen name, and she locates his work in relation to early modern accounts of hermaphrodites. M. W. Bychowski’s “The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back” revisits the case of Rykener, who was arrested for engaging in sex work in fourteenth-century London. Bychowski’s ethical reading of Rykener’s court case requires a “transgender turn” that “critiques compulsory cisgender identity assignment” across medieval studies (96). Anna Klosowska’s “Wojciech of Poznań and the Trans Archive, Poland, 1550–1561” translates the fascinating court deposition of a Polish person who lived as both a man and a woman. Klosowska proposes that Wojciech’s testimony resonates with today’s genderqueer communities.

The second section, “Frameworks: Representing Early Trans Lives,” observes the appearances of trans figures in premodern visual art, performance, and fiction. Robert Mills’s “Recognizing Wilgefortis” tracks visual representations of the bearded yet feminine martyr Wilgefortis from the early medieval period onwards. Mills captures the insistent presence of gender plurality across the history of Christian iconography. Abdulhamit Arvas’s “Performing and Desiring Gender Variance in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire” centers the *köçek*—a young dancer assigned male at birth—in Enderunlu Fazıl’s late eighteenth-century *Çenginame*. Arvas vividly theorizes the *köçek* as a form of gender plurality that evokes racial, religious, and imperial status. Masha Raskolnikov’s “Without Magic or Miracle: The *Romance of Silence* and the Prehistory of Genderqueerness” explores the intense

effort involved in a young nobleperson's life across genders. Raskolnikov's crystalline reading of *Silence* expands the medieval plurality of gender, which modern terminology too often restricts. Zrinka Stahuljak's "Transgender Translation, Humanism and Periodization: Vasco da Lucena's *Deeds of Alexander the Great*" examines a fifteenth-century manuscript in which the translator changes the gender of Alexander's sexual partners. By surveying book history and humanism alike, Stahuljak suggests that translation operates as a "transgendering tool" (220).

The final section, "Interventions: Critical Trans Methodologies," considers how to apply the theoretical frameworks of trans studies to premodern literary and historical texts. Emma Campbell's "Visualizing the Trans-Animal Body: The Hyena in Medieval Bestiaries" analyzes representations of the doubly sexed hyena in relation to trans animality. By studying the Latin *Physiologus*, Campbell portrays the hyena as multiply gendered and racially charged by its association with Jewish communities. Micah James Goodrich's "Maimed Limbs and Biosalvation: Rehabilitation Politics in *Piers Plowman*" observes how the fourteenth-century poem evaluates bodies relative to their ability to operate within a "salvific collective" (267). Goodrich proposes that the poem's discourses of salvation align with today's struggles for gender-affirming healthcare. Roland Betancourt's "Where Are All the Trans Women in Byzantium?" seeks out women who were assigned male at birth in the literary records of Byzantine Empire. Betancourt suggests that we can alter our historical methods to foreground those who might appear trans feminine. Alexa Alice Joubin's "Performing Reparative Transgender Identities from *Stage Beauty* to *The King and the Clown*" examines early 2000s film adaptations of Shakespearean dramas, in which trans figures do not require reparation or a return to their assigned gender. By attending to the South Korean blockbuster *The King and the Clown* and the American film *Stage Beauty*, Joubin uncovers trans femininity in the afterlives of premodern performances. Scott Larson's "Laid Open: Examining Genders in Early America" surveys the late nineteenth-century arrest of Reverend Joseph Israel Lobdell, who was assigned female at birth, alongside Anne Hutchinson's seventeenth-century Boston trial. Larson develops an alternative method for trans history, which he calls "critical *trans-attendance*" (352). Greta LaFleur's incisive "Epilogue: Against Consensus" approaches a variety of figures—including those who identified with traditional gender norms—as makers and teachers of trans history. By reading

Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech as a contribution to trans studies, LaFleur suggests that "there is not, and probably will never be, consensus regarding what trans history is or means" (374).

Taken together, these essays provide invaluable resources for scholarship that recognizes the resonances of gender plurality across time as well as its historical contingencies. *Trans Historical* deviates from existing queer and feminist scholarship by centering figures that have traditionally featured at the edges of critical analysis. It also expands the current picture of trans identity in premodern periods beyond recognized locations of gender plurality. In a moment of increasing anti-trans fervor across the globe, *Trans Historical* provides a vaster set of possibilities for gender plurality than is currently available in trans histories that focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Nat Rivkin

<https://doi.org/10.32773/ORNQ6884>

Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages, edited by Katherine Kerby-Fulton, Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, and John Van Engen. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. 438. ISBN: 9781843845553.

It is unusual in this era of short-ish and digitized books to read one that could be considered a "tome." Divided into six discrete sections, plus a lengthy Introduction (by Kerby-Fulton) and brief Epilogue (by Van Engen), this weighty volume contains twenty-one articles, plus six section prefaces, each written by leading scholars in each sub-field. The sheer length and complexity of the volume precludes talking about each article individually, so I will be focusing my remarks more generally and looking at the essays contained in each section as a group.

To begin: this is an excellent, even a superb, volume of essays, if organizationally a little odd. It has something for everyone inclined toward feminist (re)readings of medieval texts of all kinds. There are some less-wonderful essays, which is inevitable in a collection this long and varied, but I was impressed, even delighted, by the inventiveness, creativity, and challenges I found in the volume. Originating from a 2015 conference at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute, each article is relatively brief but tightly packed: this is not an introductory essay collection, and it is not an easy read. Kerby-Fulton,