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Kirja-arvio / A book review

Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (eds). *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*. Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2021. (Rose-Marie Peake)

Rose-Marie Peake, PhD

Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences

Tampere University

rose-marie.peake@tuni.fi

 Orcid: 0000-0002-7925-9060

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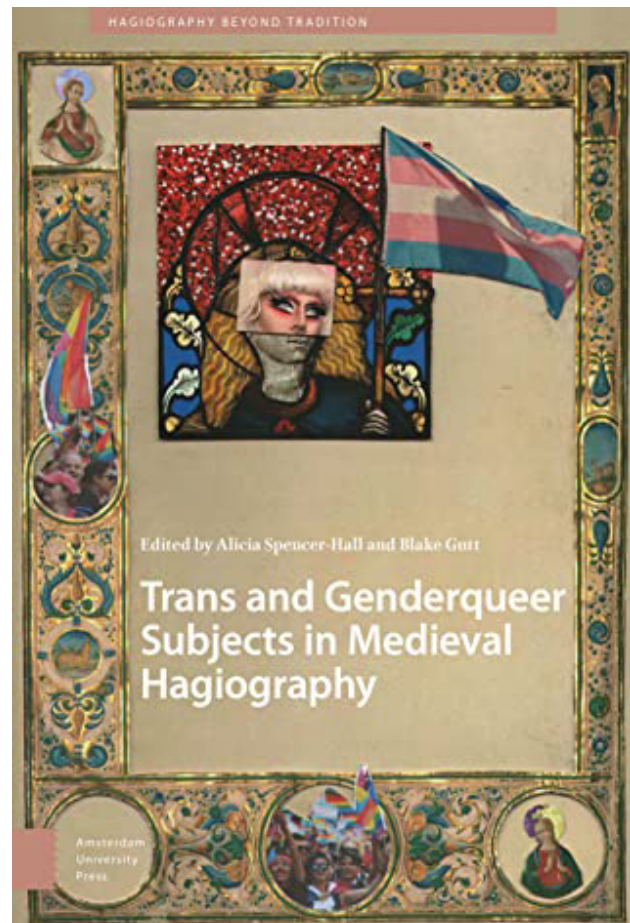
Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography.

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 342 pp.

After more than half a century of women's and gender studies, the time has come for trans studies to make a breakthrough, including in the field of historical research. Just as gender studies came about in the context of feminism, the dismantling of the binary model of gender in biology and the humanities has allowed more space for trans and genderqueer readings of the past. The volume *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* tackles a historical source particularly prolific for creating a transgender past: narratives and iconography related to saints and other holy people. The book is a joint multidisciplinary effort of seven linguists (three specializing in French or Romance languages, three in English and one in Medieval Norse), four historians, and one religious scholar.

To the average historian, the most striking feature of the volume is the loud and proud connection with the trans politics of today. As the editors Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt write in their introduction, '[i]t is inherently transphobic for cis scholars to instrumentalize trans history for the purposes of building an academic career without explicitly making the connection to, and advocating for, trans lives today'. (p. 15)

The advocacy for trans rights is present throughout the volume. The articles draw a convincing link between their medieval subjects and current questions in a way that is less forced than one would expect when encountering this style of academic writing for the first time. Amy V. Ogden, for example, studies in her article 'St Eufrosine's Invitation to Gender Transgression' the fusion of masculine and feminine elements in the Old French version of the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine* from the thirteenth century. She concludes her article by arguing that readings disregarding genderfluidity in the text reinforce a monolithic idea of the Middle Ages and conceptions of gender. This, in turn, feeds the historical basis for transphobic attitudes by legitimizing them. Hence acknowledging Eufrosine's transgressive pedagogy helps to destabilize (at least to a certain degree) the foundations



of current inequalities.

The volume also includes a 50-page appendix called ‘Trans and Genderqueer Studies Terminology, Language, and Usage Guide’, featuring terms such as ‘binder’ (an undergarment used by some transmasculine or genderqueer people to flatten their chest) and ‘packing’ (the practice of using a prosthetic penis). Unlikely to be found in medieval sources, these terms among others in the guide, however, testify to the great urge of trans scholars not only to enhance trans-sensitive approaches in medieval studies but also to disseminate information about trans rights in general. This is important in academia where permanent positions are predominantly held by white cishe¹ people. ‘Securely employed scholars [...] must use their status to support marginalized trans colleagues, practically and intellectually’, the editors insist. (p. 23)

As work in medieval trans studies is carried out importantly by precariously situated scholars, the volume invites medievalists to revisit their earlier work. An example and role model for this is Martha G. Newman and her article ‘Assigned Female at Death. Joseph of Schönau and the Disruption of Medieval Gender Binaries’, in which she reassesses the twelfth-century collection of stories by the Cistercian author Engelhard of Langheim. One of the tales features a monk called Joseph who upon his death was discovered to have been a woman, anatomically. Correcting her previous argument about Joseph as a ‘woman in disguise’, Newman now presents the monk as a trans man. She explains: ‘[...] I now recognize the essentialist assumptions in the concept of transvestism and the way an emphasis on disguise can erase transgender possibilities’. (p. 44, n. 3)

The refutation of the idea of cross-dressing saints as transvestites is one of the leading themes in the volume. In addition to Martha Newman, Kevin C.A. Elphick in ‘Juana de la Cruz. Gender-Transcendent Prophetess’, Vanessa Wright and Amy V. Ogden in their respective articles on the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*, and M.W. Bychowski in her ‘The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints. *Imago Dei* and *imitatio Christi* in the *Life* of St Marinos the Monk’ offer examples of how to produce nuanced and less reductive readings of hagiographic protagonists who cross-dress.

Sophie Sexon’s article deserves a special mention, as they treat a subject perhaps most readily connected to queer medieval studies in the mind of the average historian – Christ’s wounds. In ‘Gender-Querying Christ’s Wounds. A Non-Binary Interpretation of Christ’s Body in Late Medieval Imagery’, Sexon builds on scholarship on the feminization of Christ’s body that has been burgeoning since the 1980s, especially due to the contributions of Caroline Walker Bynum and Karma Lochrie. Astonishing in Sexon’s work is the way they extend and nuance these previous interpretations and how they demonstrate the prevalence of the idea of Christ’s body as genderfluid in the Late Middle Ages.

According to Sexon, art historical evidence does not give way to the idea of Christ’s body in transition from male to female. Instead, they argue, both genders are to be found in the one holy body that signifies fluidly. Thus, Christ’s gender lies somewhere between the fixed categories of male and female, or even surpasses them, signifying as neither.

Sexon supports their argument with intriguing evidence: birth girdles. Sexon case studies one parchment roll, Wellcome MS 632, which had a particular function in childbirth by offering protec-

¹ Cishe^t is a person whose identified gender matches their assigned gender and whose orientation is heterosexual.

tion for the mother. The parchment roll contains images of the instruments of the Passion and Christ's abstracted dripping side wound, and it was designed to be placed around the abdomen of the mother. 'The physical juxtaposition thus makes apparent the link between Christ's wound and the vagina, as the image of Christ's bleeding wound resembles the body of the woman in labour', Sexon explains (p. 138). They continue that the parchment roll was a means for the woman to assimilate herself to Christ (a body otherwise coded as masculine), as her suffering body mimicked that of Christ's in the Passion.

Turning to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Books of Hours, prayer rolls, and woodcut prints, Sexon tackles the iconographically isolated image of the wound. Interpreted convincingly as a symbol of the vulva and the vagina in previous scholarship,² Sexon, however, rejects the conclusion of the wound as feminizing the body of Christ and argues for a non-binary understanding of the vulva-like wound. 'Parts of Christ's body represent the typologically female body, showing that the feminine and the masculine are inseparably connected, and that both elements must necessarily exist within Christ's body. The icon is therefore not reducible to either gender.' (pp. 139–40)

The article builds a bridge between the Middle Ages and today by claiming that non-binary gender cannot be a solely modern phenomenon. To think so would be purely 'foolish', Sexon curtly asserts. They also bring forth the idea of a dialogue between the medieval objects and their viewers, as the latter are offered a possibility to reflect on the fluidity of gender in general and possibly also to identify the same in their own bodies. This, in turn, helps to create a history for the genderqueer people of today.

The inspiring volume is a must-read for all scholars working with religion and history. Most importantly, it is an admirable effort to dismantle cis-heteronormative conceptions of the Middle Ages (propagated alarmingly by white supremacist groups). It demonstrates convincingly how gender in the aforementioned period is more aptly described as 'messy' than stable and strictly categorized. For medieval people, saints were close to God, who was beyond gender, and gender itself was an unstable matter due to the belief in the balance or imbalance of the humours, as Mathilde van Dijk reminds us in the epilogue.

The intriguing volume leaves the reader hungry for more similar studies, also for other historical periods. The production of especially Catholic hagiographic material proliferated like never before in the Early Modern Period as the Catholic Reformation buttressed the cult of saints and the invention of the printing press disseminated the by-product of canonizations, hagiography, in unprecedented volume. Despite the new era, the medieval mystical tradition held sway in many Catholic areas and was cherished in monasteries, which experienced a revival. Hopefully this

² See Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies', in Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken & James Alfred Schultz eds., *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Medieval Cultures 11), University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1997, 180-200; Amy Hollywood, 'That Glorious Slit', in Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays. Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion*, Columbia University Press: New York 2016, 171–88; Martha Easton, 'The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages', in Susan L'Engle & Gerald B. Guest eds., *Tributes to Jonathan J.G. Alexander: Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art and Architecture*, Harvey Miller: Turnhout 2006, 395-414; Flora Lewis, 'The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response', in Jane H. M. Taylor & Lesley Smith eds., *Women and the Book: Assessing the Evidence*, University of Toronto: Toronto 1997, 204-99.

volume will facilitate the path of trans and queer scholars, who exist but are few, also in religious Early Modern studies.

Finally, the volume is of the utmost importance for the trans and genderqueer people of today, as it is in essence a serious academic endeavour to imagine a transgender past and, thus, offer a sense of historical belonging. It very likely brings comfort especially to Catholics who witnessed the rejection of LGBTQ+ identities by the Vatican in 2019. In truth, as this volume brilliantly demonstrates, the Catholic spiritual tradition incorporates significant genderqueer elements, and they should be finally recognized.

Rose-Marie Peake, PhD

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Tampere University