

# Medieval Trans Lives in Anamorphosis: Looking Back and Seeing Differently (Pregnant Men and Backward Birth)

Blake Gutt

[Le miroir] remplit . . . un rôle de limite. Il est ce que l'on ne peut franchir.  
([The mirror] fulfills . . . a role as limit. It is that which cannot be crossed.)<sup>1</sup>

## Transgender Anamorphosis

Anamorphosis, as Lacan presents it in the seventh volume of his *Séminaire*, is about looking back and seeing differently. He describes Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533), with the foregrounded anamorphic skull which

l'on voit surgir quand, après être passé devant le tableau, l'on sort de la pièce par une porte faite à cette fin de le voir dans sa vérité sinistre, au moment où l'on se retourne pour la dernière fois.<sup>2</sup>

(emerges when, having passed in front of [the painting], you leave the room by a door located so that you see it in its sinister truth, at the very moment when you turn around to look at it for the last time.)<sup>3</sup>

It is the liminal moment in the doorway, the backwards glance, which permits the skull to be seen clearly for the first time, altering in a split

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1. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre 7: L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 181. Translations are by Dennis Porter from Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 2008), 186.

2. Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 169.

3. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 173.

second the signification of the painting as a whole. Another liminal moment, described by Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, is the retrospective—and even, in a sense, posthumous—labelling of a child as queer:

The phrase “gay child” is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died. Straight person dead, gay child now born, albeit retrospectively. . . . This kind of backward birthing mechanism makes the hunt for the roots of queerness a retrospective search for amalgamated forms of feelings, desires, and physical needs that led to this death of one’s straight life. And yet, by the time the tombstone is raised (“I was a gay child”), the “child” by linguistic definition has expired.<sup>4</sup>

Stockton attends to the question of the transgender child only in relation to the move to pathologize childhood gender nonconformity that followed the formal depathologization of homosexuality in adults;<sup>5</sup> she also notes the more recent opening up of the possibility of being a transgender child, while the position of “gay child” remains foreclosed.<sup>6</sup> Although she acknowledges the frequent closeness and intertwining of gay and transgender identities, Stockton appears unaware of the extent to which the “gay” experiences that she describes are likely to resonate with a trans readership, the majority of whom did not transition in childhood. Both gay and trans adults ask each other (not to mention themselves) the by now clichéd questions: “When did you know?” “Did you know as a kid?”<sup>7</sup> both may look back on a childhood of being “remarkably, intensely unavailable to [oneself] in the present tense”;<sup>8</sup> both may “remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow.”<sup>9</sup> Both gay and trans adults remember “growing sideways,” as Stockton terms it,

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4. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 7.

5. Stockton, 14.

6. Stockton, 8.

7. Stockton, 2.

8. Stockton, 6.

9. Stockton, 3.

when growing up seemed like no option at all.<sup>10</sup> Both have experienced similar moments of anamorphosis, of making the connections afforded by a new vantage point and seeing one's personal history refocused and transformed—yet have also experienced the realization that this narrative will remain forever fractured, since “the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back.”<sup>11</sup> An anamorphic image, whether catoptric (produced using a mirror), or oblique (dependent solely on the viewer's perspective) remains the product of a particular vantage point: the projected image remains at a distance, as well as at an angle. However, although it can never be brought close, or fully assimilated into a linear conception of time, anamorphosis remains highly generative of connections and of understanding.

Stockton's concept of the queer child's “backward birth,” when read in conjunction with Lacan's notion of anamorphosis, demonstrates the need for, and the function of, transgender readings of texts.<sup>12</sup> As important as (re)reading our own (hi)story is (re)reading the (hi)stories of others. Reading through the anamorphosis which the trans perspective entails is not only unavoidable for the trans subject, but also an essential part of inhabiting trans identity. By identifying others like us in the past we establish temporal roots and refuse to exist only “next to History,” where Stockton locates “the ghostly gay child,” instead demonstrating our participation *with* and *in* history.<sup>13</sup> It is this process of identification that I will explore through an anamorphic perspective as I undertake trans readings of two thirteenth-century French texts featuring men who give birth: *Aucassin et Nicolette* and *Le Roman de Saint Fanuel*.<sup>14</sup> I will examine some of the ways that these texts resonate with modern pregnancy narratives by trans men and gender non-conforming people, considering A.K. Summers's 2014 graphic novel *Pregnant Butch* and

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10. Stockton, 11-17, 3.

11. Stockton, 5.

12. Stockton, 6.

13. Stockton, 3, 9.

14. Philippe Walter, ed. and trans., *Aucassin et Nicolette* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011); Camille Chabaneau, ed., *Le Romanz de Saint Fanuel et de Sainte Anne et de Nostre Dame et de Nostre Segnor et de Ses Apostres* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Charles Leclerc, 1889).

j wallace skelton's 2010 essay "The Manly Art of Pregnancy." I will show how different lines of sight open up productive new interpretative possibilities, and demonstrate how seeing clearly can also be seeing queerly.<sup>15</sup> I aim to emulate Carolyn Dinshaw in her "[focus] on the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then," following her suggestion that "with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time."<sup>16</sup> But first I would like to consider some pragmatics of reading and identifying.

### Reading Queerly

Reading is an inherently risky and revealing act. Readings of texts function through an economy of the gaze which operates in both directions: what one sees indicates *how* one sees. Similarly to a Rorschach test, what one recognizes in a text reveals something about who one is. This phenomenon is particularly marked when it comes to queer readings advanced within a hetero- and cisnormative culture: to propose a reading equates to—or is seen as equating to—declaring sympathy with what one sees. To identify is always, to some extent, to identify *with*, or even, potentially, to identify (oneself) *as*. The adage that "it takes one to know one" resonates strongly within the realm of textual interpretation: seeing and knowing, reading and recognizing are all inextricably linked.

Clearly, every reader has their own anamorphoses, but some perspectives—being more culturally normative—are more readily socially assimilable than others. When it comes to transgender readings of texts, I would ask, therefore, whether it "takes one to read one." In *Seeing*

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15. A. K. Summers, *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2014); j wallace, "The Manly Art of Pregnancy," in *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, ed. Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010). (j wallace skelton was formerly known as j wallace, the name under which this essay was published.)

16. Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, J. Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher S. Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 177-95, 178.

*Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, Robert Mills devotes his second chapter, “Transgender Time,” to transgender readings; he questions why such readings are not more commonly deployed in scholarship of medieval literature and culture, pointing out that

medieval European clerical culture appears to have had somewhat clearer ideas about gender transformation than it did about the practices that today cluster under the heading of “sexuality.”<sup>17</sup>

Mills also points out that sodomy, as a catchall term for nonreproductive sexual activity, was often “a profoundly gendered concept.”<sup>18</sup> He notes, therefore, that “transgender” is a very useful category for reading medieval thought on both gender nonconformity and non-straight sexuality, since the two are often extremely difficult to separate, with nonnormative gendered behavior playing a highly significant role in medieval understanding of same-sex attraction. This is an immensely valuable observation; however, to attempt, as Mills does, to reach and to read trans perspectives *through* gay perspectives means inevitably arriving at a view of trans subjectivity which is both secondhand and incomplete.

Mills cites David M. Halperin’s interpretation of the relationship between same-sex attraction and gender identity in “Forgetting Foucault” and *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, in which Halperin “produces a genealogy of homosexuality that treats gender transitivity as a largely superseded model.”<sup>19</sup> Perceived gender transitivity in the context of same-sex attraction does not necessarily equate to transgender identity, yet Mills interprets Halperin’s argument as situating notions of transfemininity as historical antecedents to modern understandings of gay men. Halperin’s aim, however, is to untangle and elucidate the various sexual and gendered attributes which have been invoked to categorize men who have sex with men; he is resistant both to easy identification between categories specific to different historical periods and to unequivocal assertions of their radical difference. Halperin does not present anything as straightforward as a teleological progression from

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17. Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015), 81.

18. Mills, 81.

19. Mills, 87.

gender transitivity to gender intransitivity. He draws attention to the fact that male effeminacy “was for a long time defined as a symptom of an excess of what we would now call heterosexual as well as homosexual desire,”<sup>20</sup> and notes that

too great an emphasis on the historical specificity and time-bound insularity of previous sexual formations . . . leads to the marginalization of anyone whose sexual or gender practices approximate to those of earlier, pre-modern subjects or do not conform to mainstream notions of “homosexuality as we understand it today.”<sup>21</sup>

Here the question of whether, when it comes to transgender readings, it “takes one to read one” becomes pertinent. Mills conflates gender transitivity, the inversion model of homosexuality, and transgender identity, and ultimately retains the notion that “transgender” is marked by the pastness which Halperin attributes to figures such as the ancient Greek *kinaidos*.<sup>22</sup> While indicating the simultaneous futurity of transgender, Mills preserves the concept that trans identities potentially denote “[bodies] behind the times.”<sup>23</sup>

By excerpting a small part of Halperin’s discussion of the history of homosexuality and transforming it into a comparatively large part of his reflections on the historicity of “transgender” as a category, Mills gives the impression that “transgender” is a subcategory of “homosexuality.” While working to disrupt the discursive boundaries between the modern and premodern eras and between concepts of gender and sexuality, Mills approaches trans identities sideways, attempting to reach them through Halperin’s discussion of homosexual gender constructions. Transgender readings can only reveal their full potential when the possibilities of transgender identity are employed as the primary prism through which to view a text, rather than as an adjunct to another interpretative framework. Mills’s championing of the value of transgender readings

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20. David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 111.

21. Halperin, 18.

22. Mills, *Seeing Sodomy*, 87, 90. See also David M. Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault,” *Representations*, No. 63 (Summer, 1998): 93–120, 103, doi:10.2307/2902919.

23. Mills, *Seeing Sodomy*, 90.

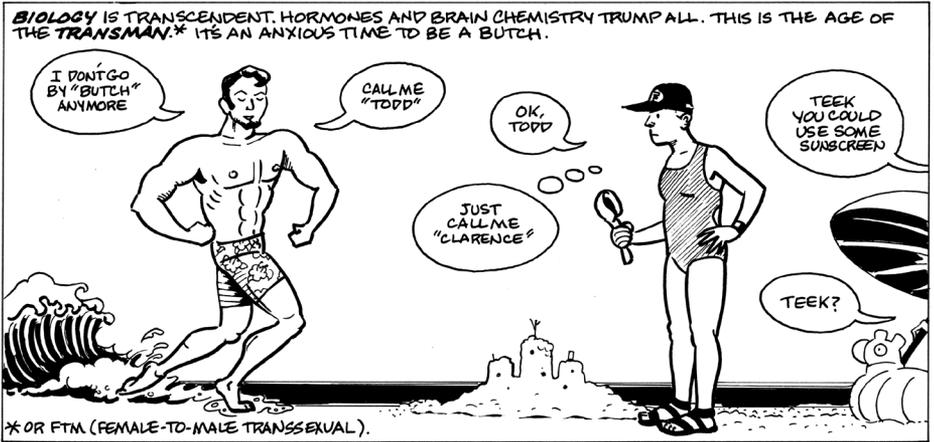


Figure 1: Teek Thomasson, A.K. Summers’s butch protagonist, feels old-fashioned compared to the “new” phenomenon of the trans man. *Pregnant Butch*, p. 53. Copyright © 2014 by A.K. Summers from *Pregnant Butch*. Reprinted by permission of Soft Skull, an imprint of Counterpoint.

is immensely important. Nevertheless, his discussion of these readings could be developed through increased trans cultural fluency: in other words, Mills’ writing is, inevitably, characterized by his own particular anamorphoses.

This is particularly evident in the fact that Mills provides, via his reading of Halperin, a specific AMAB perspective on the historical relationship between homosexuality and gender identity.<sup>24</sup> He does not discuss the strand of AFAB experience which is precisely the opposite of this, the site of so-called “border wars” between butch women and trans men: the concern is that “butch,” as a(n often gay) gender identity, is becoming an anachronism as medical transition becomes both easier to access and more normalized—not only a butch identity, but potentially a gay identity, may thereby be lost, and some fear that the butch may disappear altogether (fig. 1).<sup>25</sup> This perspective reverses the

24. AMAB: Assigned Male At Birth. AFAB: Assigned Female At Birth.  
 25. See, for example, J. Halberstam, “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 287-310, and S. Bear Bergman, “The Field Guide to Transmasculine Creatures,” in *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You* (Vancouver CN: Arsenal Pulp

temporal “order” of the move from “gender transitivity” to “gay identity” that Mills invokes. My point is that, while trans identification does not guarantee theoretical insight, perspectives unfamiliar with the discourse of trans communities can only ever give a partial impression of the view from the trans subject position. Thus, although it does not *necessarily* take one to read one, trans voices and perspectives are essential in establishing trans readings.

### Seeing Queerly; Writing Queerly

The question of visibility is key to both queer readings and the anamorphic gaze; it is no coincidence that Mills’s book is entitled *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*. The issue of who one can see, and by whom one can be seen, is central to the consideration of non-socially-normative identities and/or behaviors. To remain hidden evokes suspicion, while visibility predictably leads to accusations of threatening or endangering social norms. The question of who can see non-straight behavior always has a double answer. The first group are those who are themselves queer, in whatever particular way is under scrutiny; being non-straight, they are thought to be able to recognize queerness in others, hence the concept of gaydar. The second group are the opposite: those who are most fervently opposed to queerness. Investing themselves with moral authority, these people often claim a diagnostic gaze, being more able than others to detect insidious non-straight behavior wherever it might seek to conceal itself—for example, in Tinky Winky’s red handbag on *Teletubbies*, on which evidence Jerry Falwell denounced the programme as “damaging to the moral lives of children” in 1999.<sup>26</sup> But what does it say about the fiercest critics of queerness that they share a specific visual acuity with those whom they would condemn?

In his 1049 *Liber gomorrhianus*, a polemic against sodomitic behavior

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Press, 2009), 90–96. See also J. Halberstam, “From Sister George to Lonesome George? Or, Is The Butch Back?,” *Bully Bloggers* (blog), July 16, 2015, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/07/16/from-sister-george-to-lonesome-george-or-is-the-butch-back/>, accessed December 4, 2018.

26. BBC News, “Gay Tinky Winky bad for children,” February 15, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/276677.stm>, accessed December 4, 2018.

between members of the clergy, Peter Damian (ca. 1007–ca. 1072) imputes a nefarious type of vision to those who engage in the four types of sexual behavior that he lists as sodomitical. In ascending order of severity, these are: masturbation; mutual masturbation; intercrural intercourse; and anal intercourse.<sup>27</sup> As William Burgwinkle writes:

[Peter Damian] assumes that such men are recognizable to one another while escaping the notice of most, and that they can therefore more easily dissolve within the larger community and infiltrate even the highest echelons of power. They are thus, like Peter, gifted with a sort of added vision, an ability to read the soul of their fellow monks, and to force recognition.<sup>28</sup>

Peter therefore shares a characteristic with those whom he condemns; the paradox of seeing queerness irrevocably binds the non-straight and the most fervently straight together.

In *De planctu Naturae*, dated to around 1170, Alain de Lille (ca. 1128–ca. 1202) figures straightness and queerness as differing ways of, to borrow a phrase from Burgwinkle, “writing the self.”<sup>29</sup> *De planctu Naturae* presents Nature’s complaint against Venus, whom she (Nature) has assigned to oversee reproduction; Venus’s task involves writing with pen on parchment and correctly drawing each gender according to Nature’s strict rules. Any incorrect “writing” is labelled *falsigraphy*. As David Rollo summarizes:

To write according to the laws of nature is, in the words of Nature herself, an exercise in accurately attributing grammatical gender to each thing. This correct procedure in gender assignment is

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27. See Peter Damian, *Letters 31–60*, trans. Owen J. Blum (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990); the *Liber gomorrhianus* is Letter 31.

28. William Burgwinkle, “Visible and Invisible Bodies and Subjects in Peter Damian,” in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47–62, 53.

29. William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 170.

figuratively equated with heterosexual intercourse, the pen emitting ink and imprinting form onto the matrix of the parchment. What Nature designates as *falsigraphia* is any deviation from this script, an error in gender identification that would logically take as its consequence a deviation from conventional sex.<sup>30</sup>

This *falsigraphia* could refer equally to homosexual or to transgender behavior or identities. These different conceptions of reading and writing the self will serve as productive reference points for my examination of two thirteenth-century French texts. I will show how, with an anamorphic “queer look back,” we can open possibilities of interpretation and understanding enabled by modern conceptions of transgender identities.

### *Aucassin et Nicolette*

*Aucassin et Nicolette* is preserved in a single manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 2168.<sup>31</sup> This anonymous *chante-fable*, as the text identifies itself, is either the sole survivor of its genre (a hybrid format, alternating song and prose) or its genre's only work. The narrative tells of two young lovers, Aucassin and Nicolette, and their journey through a series of adventures and hardships in their quest to be together. The traditional critical stance views Aucassin as a rather fey and feminine young man, since he is prone to pining and unwilling to fight, while the pragmatic Nicolette is marked as somewhat masculine by the determined agency which leads her to save herself from imprisonment when necessary and to disguise herself as a (male) *jongleur* in order to be reunited with her lover. As such, the text has often been read as a narrative of Aucassin's maturation towards normative gendered behavior. The episode that I want to consider involves Aucassin's interactions with the King of Torelore in his apparently “topsy-turvy” kingdom, where the lovers spend over three years. Torelore, with its King who gives birth, has often been seen to function as an important test for Aucassin,

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30. David Rollo, *Kiss My Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 80.

31. This manuscript has been fully digitized by the BnF. See: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9058947p/fi.image.f=2168>, accessed December 4, 2018.

presenting him with gender-variant behavior more extreme than his own and thereby allowing him to exercise his own sense of gender normativity as he ostensibly “restores” a rigid gender binary to the kingdom. Rather than questioning his own notions of the dictates of gendered behavior when confronted with a functioning alternative system, Aucassin reacts with anger against the King. Aucassin’s insistence on the propriety of heteronormative structures takes on, in its fervor, the force of morality, casting heteronormativity as the single correct and natural order. Here it has apparently been subverted and replaced by a queer alternative, but it can, and should, be restored to what is implied to be its primary state. However, looking back at Torelore, and at Aucassin’s dealings with its King, from a position of trans anamorphosis reveals a very different narrative with greatly altered implications.

As soon as they arrive in the kingdom, Aucassin and Nicolette are confronted with evidence of Torelore’s queer functioning:

[Aucassin] erra tant qu’il vint el castel. Il demande u li rois estoit, et on li dist qu’il gissoit d’enfant.

“E u est dont se femme ?”

Et on li dist qu’ele est en l’ost et si i avoit mené tox ciax du païs. Et Aucassins l’oï, si li vint a grant merveille.<sup>32</sup>

(Aucassin rode until he arrived at the castle. He asked where the king was, and they told him that he was lying in childbed.

“And where is his wife, then?”

And he is told that she is on campaign, and has taken all the inhabitants of the country with her. Aucassin hears this, and marvels greatly.)<sup>33</sup>

“Gesir d’enfant” is a standard phrase used of a woman in childbed, referring both to labor and to the ensuing period of recovery. As Anne Martineau points out, *Aucassin et Nicolette* contains its only attestation in reference to a man, supporting the reading that the King has given

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32. Philippe Walter, ed. and trans., *Aucassin et Nicolette* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 128.

33. All translations from medieval French are my own.

birth.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the King's lying-in has often been analyzed as a couvade ritual, a "sympathetic pregnancy" or a birth custom in which the father mimics labor. This explanation was first proposed by Legrand d'Aussy in 1779 and has been adopted, apparently unthinkingly, by generation after generation of scholars unwilling to take the text at its word.<sup>35</sup> I argue, however, that the text makes clear that the King has given birth.

This assertion is further supported by another suggestive line later in the text. Arriving at the castle, Aucassin heads straight for the king's bedchamber:

Il est venus dusque au lit,  
alec u li rois se gist ;  
par devant lui s'arestit,  
si parla ; oés que dist :  
"Di va ! fau, que fais tu ci ?"  
Dist li rois : "Je gis d'un fil.  
Quant mes mois sera conplis  
et je sarai bien garis,  
dont irai le messe oïr,  
si com mes anc[estre fist],  
et me grant guerre esbaudir  
encontre mes anemis :  
nel lairai mie."<sup>36</sup>

(He came right up to the bed where the king was lying; he stopped in front of him and spoke; listen to what he said: "My God, you fool! What are you doing here?" The king said, "I'm lying in for my son. When my month is over and I am fully healed, then I will go to hear mass, just as my ancestors did, and I will revel in my great war against my enemies: I won't renounce it!")

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34. Anne Martineau, "L'impossible roi féminin de Torelore (*Aucassin et Nicolette*, fin de XIIe s. ou début du XIIIe)," in "Reines, princesses, favorites: Quelle autorité déclinée au féminin ?," *Cahiers du CELEC en ligne* no. 3 (9 September 2011), <http://cahierscelec.msh-lse.fr/node/21>, accessed December 4, 2018, 8.

35. Martineau, 8.

36. Walter, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, 130.

As well as the repetition of the phrase “gesir d’enfant,” we here read “Quant mes mois sera conplis / et je sarai bien garis”: “When my month is over and I am fully healed.” The King is speaking of physical recovery, which seems a clear indication that he has given birth. The fact that Torelore is purposefully conceived as a topsy-turvy land, where chivalric cultural norms are overturned or parodied, presents another argument in favor of the King’s pregnancy. Yet we should not be too hasty in drawing such conclusions; to infer from the King’s pregnancy a simple inversion of the gender binary, and therefore to assume that in Torelore men give birth and women do not, does nothing to deconstruct the binary itself. Projecting the familiar gender binary onto the text leads to the couvade solution; the inversion of this binary generates the assertion that Torelore is a mirror-version of the familiar world of chivalric romance, with all roles reversed. More productive than either of these responses, however, is a close and unprejudiced reading of the text itself.

The fact that the King lies in childbed while the Queen leads “toxciax du païs” (all the inhabitants of the country; in modern French “tous ceux du pays”) in battle has often been interpreted as evidence of a wholesale reversal of gender roles. We should note, however, the use of the plural pronoun “ciax,” which may connote either “all the men of the country,” or “all the people of the country.” The one thing that it is unlikely to mean is “all the *women* of the country,” which is what we might expect the text to tell us if Torelore were truly operating on the opposite of chivalric norms. However, since *Aucassin et Nicolette* is written in the Picard dialect, which allows a number of epicene forms that are not found elsewhere, the form of the pronoun cannot be taken as an absolute guarantee of the gender of its referents. Nevertheless, the question remains sufficiently unclear that any assumption of a total reversal of gendered behavior remains unwarranted. The King has stated that when he is well he will return to waging war. Whether he normally leads his troops to battle alone, or whether the King and Queen do so jointly, it is clear that in this case the King is absent from the battlefield by reason of having given birth. The text is unequivocal on that point—yet there appears to be a strong critical impulse to resist this reading.

More critical attention has typically been paid to Aucassin’s supposed

“normalization” of the behavior of Torelore’s citizens. Aucassin responds to the King’s affirmation that he has given birth as follows:

— Par le cuer Diu ! fait Aucassins, malvais fix a putain, je vos ocirai, se vos ne m’afîés que ja mais hom en vo tere d’enfant ne gerra.<sup>37</sup>

(— By God’s heart! says Aucassin, you wicked son of a whore, I’ll kill you if you don’t swear to me that no man in your kingdom will ever lie in childbed again.)

Aucassin violently beats the King, who swears the oath which is demanded of him, and the question of childbirth is not raised again within the narrative; with one enforced performative utterance, many critics have argued, Aucassin has successfully introduced normative gender roles to Torelore. It is, though, worth questioning the sincerity of the oath that the King swears to an enraged stranger who has appeared in his bedroom, questioned his lifestyle, and proceeded to beat him. Aucassin’s attack on the King is typically read as a humorous overreaction—extreme perhaps, but not unfounded—to the King’s “crazy” (read: queer) behavior. We could also read the attack, however, as a clear case of queer-bashing, its violence stemming from Aucassin’s perception that the King is willfully refusing to conform to gender norms as Aucassin understands them. The fact that the subject of childbirth is not addressed further within the text provides no confirmation one way or the other concerning any changes to Torelore’s gender norms. In fact, the evidence of Aucassin’s disastrous visit to the battlefield suggests that change cannot be effected so easily. Our “hero” brings a sword to what turns out to be a food fight and horrifies the King with his murderous violence; as the King explains, “il n’est mie costume que nos entrocions li uns l’autre” (it is certainly not our custom to kill one another).<sup>38</sup> In response to this debacle, the people of Torelore advise their King to drive Aucassin from the land. Far from being “corrected” on the question of how war should be waged, the populace uphold their objections to what was, to them, a startling display of barbarity. Why, then, should their response in the matter of childbirth be any different?

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37. Walter, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, 132.

38. Walter, 136.

Whether or not he is unique within his kingdom, the King of Torelore is a man who gives birth, and he is not considered, nor does he consider himself to be, any less a man because of his body's capabilities. Therefore, the Torelore episode effectively confronts the reader with a de-gendering of pregnancy, a separation of body parts and their operation from gender identities. A look back through a transgender anamorphosis can therefore reveal the King of Torelore as a trans man.

### A Queer Look Back

Recognizing and acknowledging characters who can be read as trans in medieval texts—characters in whom modern trans people might see themselves—is a powerful affirmative act for trans visibility. This does not equate to a declaration that such characters were intended by their authors to represent transgender individuals, nor that medieval people understood and experienced gender nonconformity and transgender identities in the same way that we do today—although there is every reason to imagine that non-cis people have always existed, just as non-straight people have always existed. Rather, trans readings provide space to think about, and to think through, questions and complications of gender identity, both medieval and modern. As Stockton writes:

I cannot “go back” to texts, historical or fictional, so as to think their meanings in their own time. No one can. They can exist for me only now as the reader I am, a reader who is using (at this current moment) a raft of ideas from decades of reading so as to read texts that themselves are extremely complex amalgams of various times.<sup>39</sup>

It is impossible for a twenty-first century reader to read or think with a medieval mindset, or to see through a medieval anamorphosis. Instead, with what I term a “queer look back” at these texts, acknowledging our own temporal and cultural subject positions, we can open possibilities of interpretation and understanding enabled by modern conceptions of transgender identities. Trans readers are as entitled as cis readers to point

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39. Stockton, *Queer Child*, 9.

to what is familiar in medieval texts; the line of argument that maintains that non-cis gender identities are anachronistic to medieval thought and culture is itself both anachronistic and ill-informed. The words used to describe trans experiences, bodies, and lives have undoubtedly changed since the thirteenth century, but trans people were surely there. Furthermore, trans readings of medieval texts can uncover productive resonances with modern experience. The King of Torelore appears entirely comfortable with his body and its generative capabilities. As such, not only is his attitude to pregnancy reminiscent of some of the experiences of modern trans men who give birth, but equally he presents a positive literary role model for male pregnancy.

### *Le Roman de Saint Fanuel*

The second medieval text I will discuss is *Le Roman de Saint Fanuel*. This anonymous hagiographic romance is the first text of the *Histoire de Marie et de Jésus* cycle, a sequence of narrative poems recounting the lives of the Virgin and her son, which began to circulate together in the early thirteenth century. Maureen Barry McCann Boulton frames these texts as “a religious alternative to the marvellous adventures of Arthurian romance,” since the generic hybridity of the cycle positions it at the intersection of sacred and secular.<sup>40</sup> *Fanuel* spans the time from the childhood of the Virgin Mary’s great-grandmother to Mary’s own youth and provides extensive details of the branch of the holy family tree from which Mary descended. Boulton notes that the cycle as a whole is “marked by secular romance’s preoccupation with ancestry and lineage,” and this is clearly evident in *Fanuel*.<sup>41</sup> However, the genealogical information offered by the text is far from canonical.

The narrative traces Mary’s lineage from her great-great-grandfather, Abraham, onwards and recounts the assimilation of a literal tree—albeit a holy one—into the family tree from which the savior would be born in human form. It begins after the fall of mankind, when God removes

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40. Maureen Barry McCann Boulton, *Sacred Fictions of Medieval France: Narrative Theology in the Lives of Christ and the Virgin* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 36.

41. Boulton, 36–37.

the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden and charges Abraham with keeping it safe in his orchard, since its destiny is to be the rood tree. An angel descends from heaven every day to guard the tree, on which a single flower blossoms (41-58).<sup>42</sup> Abraham has a twelve-year-old daughter, who plays in the orchard every day; one day she picks the flower, which produces such a powerful perfume that she immediately becomes pregnant from the scent (105-22). Local law enforcement officials become aware of the pregnancy and threaten to stone the young woman to death as an adulterer. Unintimidated, she volunteers to undergo a judicial ordeal in order to prove her innocence (185-202). A bonfire is built, but when Abraham's daughter is placed upon it, the flames turn into birds and flowers, and the fire goes out (203-333). In time Abraham's daughter gives birth to a son, whom she names Fanuel; he is favored by God, and grows up to be both a king and a saint (395-409). He also has access to a supply of magical, sacred apples, which, when administered by him to the sick, restore them instantly to health (417-22). The text never clarifies exactly where these apples come from, but the implication is that they are the fruit of the tree that is Fanuel's father, which explains why it must be Fanuel who distributes them. One day Fanuel notices some juice left on the blade of his knife after cutting an apple, so he wipes it on his thigh to clean it (435-41) (fig. 2). Thereupon, this contact with the magical apple juice causes Fanuel's thigh to conceive a child, Saint Anne (442-44). The pregnant Saint Fanuel summons all the doctors in the land, but not one can diagnose the problem (447-54). Eventually, he retires to bed, and gives birth from his thigh (455-60). Fanuel is horrified and ashamed; he does not want anyone to find out that he has given birth, so he asks one of his most trusted knights to take the baby out into the forest and kill her (463-74). However, a talking dove warns the knight not to do this as the baby is vital for God's incarnation. So instead of killing her, the knight leaves the baby in a bird's nest and returns to tell Fanuel that his secret is safe (484-504). Saint Anne grows up in the forest, living

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42. Camille Chabaneau, ed., *Le Romanz de Saint Fanuel et de Sainte Anne et de Nostre Dame et de Nostre Segnor et de Ses Apostres* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Charles Leclerc, 1889). Cited parenthetically by line.



Figure 2: Fanuel distributes magical apples to the sick and injured; with his right hand, he is wiping the knife on his left thigh. It is interesting to note that, although Fanuel becomes pregnant in his thigh, this image of what is presumably the moment of Saint Anne's conception seems to depict Fanuel with a rather rounded abdomen; the folds of his clothing even give the suggestion of breasts. MS Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 20, folio 4r. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

in the nest, and being fed and cared for by a stag (507-22). Ten years later, Fanuel and his seneschal, Joachim, go hunting in the same forest, where they soon happen upon a very large stag—Anne's stag—which, when they pursue it, leads them right to the nest where she is sitting (523-38) (fig. 3). Joachim asks Anne who she is and who her parents are, and she explains her birth and her parentage (556-78). At this point the narrative abruptly switches gears and continues on a much more familiar, canonical path: Saint Anne is very quickly married off to Joachim, and the text changes course to describe Elizabeth and Zachariah's struggles with infertility before they conceive John the Baptist. Nothing about Saint Anne's parentage is mentioned again.



Figure 3: The stag leads Fanuel (crowned) and Joachim to Anne in the bird's nest. MS Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 20, folio 4v. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The aspect of this bizarre and wonderful narrative on which I will focus here is Saint Fanuel's pregnancy, and more specifically two moments in which Fanuel relates to his daughter, and she to him. The first is Saint Fanuel's realization that he has given birth:

Quant li rois sot qu'il ot enfant,  
 Vergongne en ot et honte grant;  
 Il apela de sa maisnie  
 ·I· chevalier ou moult se fie.  
 Se li a dit, "Biaus dous amis,  
 Que dira on en cest pais  
 Quant on saura que j'ai enfant?"<sup>43</sup>

43. MS Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 20, folio 4rb; Chabaneau, *Le Romanz de Saint Fanuel*, lines 463-69. I give two references for each citation from *Fanuel*; the first gives the folio of the manuscript from which I transcribed the lines, and the

(When the king realised that he had had a child, he was embarrassed and greatly ashamed of this; he summoned from his household a knight whom he trusted greatly. He said to him: “Sweet handsome friend, what will they say in this land when it is known that I have a child?”)

Fanuel reacts to the reproductive capacity that his body has demonstrated with shame and embarrassment: in other words, he feels dysphoria reminiscent of that which many trans people experience in relation to parts of their body which are incongruent with their gender identity. Furthermore, Fanuel’s pregnancy occurs in his thigh: “sa cuisse si engenra / Une moult gentil damoisele”<sup>44</sup> (his thigh conceived / A most noble young lady). “Thigh” was a medieval euphemism for genitalia; the best known example is that of the Fisher King or *Roi Mébaignié* (Wounded King), whose “thigh” wound leaves not only the King, but his entire kingdom, sterile. The deployment of this euphemism in the case of the pregnant saint resonates with the powerful practices of (re) naming by which trans people mark their ownership of and authority over their own bodies. As Gabe Moses writes in the poem “How To Make Love to a Trans Person,”

Forget the images you’ve learned to attach  
To words like cock and clit,  
Chest and breasts.  
Break those words open.<sup>45</sup>

By breaking words open, as Moses expresses it, we can annul their hold over us; through the practice of (re)naming, we can assert our own agency. The movement of displacement—which is also a movement of creation—in which an organ capable of gestation is named as a gender-neutral body part echoes the ways in which transgender people use language to express and communicate their identities and to reject

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second indicates the equivalent lines in Chabaneau’s published edition of the text.

44. Fitzwilliam 20, f. 4ra; Chabaneau, *Le Romanz de Saint Fanuel*, 442-43.

45. Gabe Moses, “How To Make Love to a Trans Person,” *GenderQueer Chicago* (blog), February 28, 2011, <http://genderqueerchicago.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/how-to-make-love-to-trans-person.html>, accessed December 4, 2018, lines 1-4.

imposed norms. This linguistic choice in *Le Roman de Saint Fanuel* has the potential to provide modern trans people with a moment of recognition, a glimpse of themselves.

The second moment I will examine is Anne's description of her parentage when she is discovered in the bird's nest. She says:

Je ne vi onques li mien pere,  
Mais jou voi la venir ma mere.  
Dites li tost qu'il viegne a mi,  
Si me meche jus de cest ni.<sup>46</sup>

(I have never seen my father, but I see my mother coming now. Tell him to come to me straight away, and to get me down from this nest.)

Anne is completely at ease with Fanuel's gender—in fact, given that her other parent is a tree, the saint's pregnancy is hardly the most unusual aspect of her parentage. Her natural use of “he, him” pronouns to refer to the man whom she also calls her “mother” is striking, and particularly so to trans readers, who may face a daily struggle to be referred to by the correct pronouns. Pronouns are vastly overdetermined, freighted with an enormous weight of cultural signification: they are used to label, but also to interpellate and to reprimand. Thus, for trans people, usage of the correct pronouns is immensely meaningful both in terms of social perception and of self-image. Anne's use of the word “mother” to describe the man who bore her emphasizes the narrative's expansion of gendered possibilities—or perhaps it is more correct to say non-gendered possibilities since, as in the case of the King of Torelore, it is made clear that Fanuel is no less a man for the fact that he is also a mother. Modern trans men who give birth, however, tend to prefer words other than “mother,” since it is an inescapably female-gendered term. The writer and activist j wallace skelton cites the terms “bearing father” and “seahorse papa,” the latter referring to the fact that it is the male seahorse which gestates the fertilized eggs and gives birth to the offspring.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Fitzwilliam 20, f. 5ra; Chabaneau, *Le Romanz de Saint Fanuel*, 563-66.

47. j wallace, “The Manly Art of Pregnancy,” in *Gender Outlaws: The Next*

Although Fanuel experiences a dysphoric reaction to his body's biological capabilities, he, like the King of Torelore, presents an example of a man who gives birth while remaining securely gendered as male. Once again, if we read through a trans anamorphism, Saint Fanuel is revealed as a transgender man. Returning to Dinshaw's words, which I quoted earlier, I turn my attention to what she describes as "the possibility of touching across time"<sup>48</sup> by investigating some of the ways in which the experiences of these medieval pregnant men, when read through a trans anamorphosis, might resonate with modern trans men's and gender non-conforming people's experiences of pregnancy. In ways that are sometimes strikingly reminiscent of their medieval counterparts, modern trans and gender nonconforming people encounter problems with the ways in which they are seen, and the ways in which their existences are read.

### Trans and Gender Nonconforming Pregnancy in the Twenty-first Century

j wallace skelton described, in a post on Facebook, the following encounter when he was pregnant with his second child:

It happened again today. I was in a school I have been working with across this year planning some future work. I encouraged them to book dates before the end of April because we are expecting in early May. The principal offered congratulations and then asked if we were expecting an infant. Again, it took me a minute. Then I got there. I'm a queer dude, and so her assumption is we must be adopting. Sometimes the invisibility of being a pregnant dude startles me.<sup>49</sup>

This radical, startling invisibility—that of a seven-month pregnant trans

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*Generation*, ed. Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010), 188–94, 193. (j wallace skelton was formerly known as j wallace, the name under which this essay was published.)

48. Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 178.

49. j wallace skelton, post on Facebook, March 5 2015, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com). Quoted with permission.

man, standing in front of a colleague and discussing his unborn child, while she is unable to see his pregnancy—demonstrates (if demonstration were needed) that problems of visibility and legibility are not an issue relating only to the reading of texts from other times, nor to the textual realm alone. The reading and interpretation of human bodies encountered in daily social interactions can be just as troublesome, as trans and gender nonconforming people know only too well—and pregnancy, with its deeply-engrained gendered and cultural associations, seems only to complicate matters further.

A.K. Summers exposes precisely this kind of gender trouble in her autobiographical graphic novel, *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* (2014). Through her protagonist, Teek Thomasson, Summers explores her experiences of the incongruence between a butch gender identity and pregnancy, culturally encoded as the pinnacle of femininity. This association of pregnancy not only with particular organs, but also with a specific type of female gender, is so pervasive that Teek even finds herself wondering whether her butch gender identity will affect her chances of conceiving (fig. 4). Like bearing father j wallace skelton and Saint Fanuel, pregnant in the thigh, Teek too feels uncomfortable with the language surrounding gestation; the word “pregnancy” itself arouses a discomfort which might be read as dysphoria (figs. 5-7). Nor is it only trans and gender nonconforming pregnant people who find the accompanying language to be ill-fitting. wallace skelton notes that:

A number of ciswomen friends had also complained that when they became pregnant they went from being “women” to “ladies” and they found the prissiness of the word uncomfortable. They too found “pregnant person” a better fit, especially if it meant not being referred to as a “lady” all the time.<sup>50</sup>

Evidently, the gendering efforts that surround pregnancy affect not just pregnant men, but also pregnant women, no matter their gender presentation. The idea that pregnancy demands a very specific performance of gender is deeply culturally encoded and therefore difficult to escape.

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50. wallace, “The Manly Art of Pregnancy,” 192.

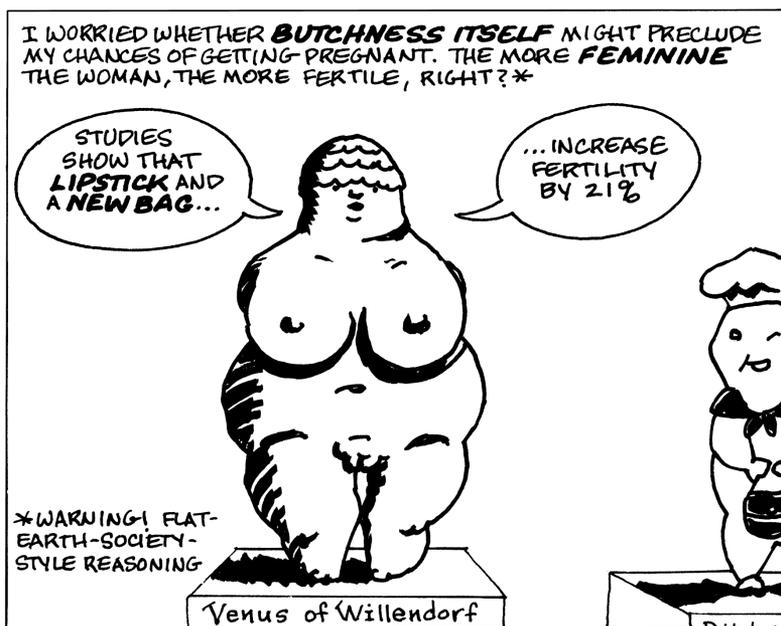


Figure 4: Teek addresses the internalized notion that the ability to bear children corresponds directly to femininity. *Pregnant Butch*, p. 11. Copyright © 2014 by A.K. Summers from *Pregnant Butch*. Reprinted by permission of Soft Skull, an imprint of Counterpoint.

Teek is not a pregnant man, although her masculinity constitutes an important part of her gender identity and presentation; she discovers that, counterintuitively, pregnancy increases her ability to pass as male.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, wallace skelton writes of his own experience: “It appears that if you’re a guy, pregnancy does not make you a woman: it just makes you fat.”<sup>52</sup> wallace skelton also points out that the physical effects of pregnancy can be read as masculinizing just as easily as they can be read as feminizing; he compares the increase in body hair while pregnant to the effects of taking testosterone.<sup>53</sup> Regarding the gendering effect of maternity wear, he writes:

51. Summers, *Pregnant Butch*, 2-5.

52. wallace, “The Manly Art of Pregnancy,” 192.

53. wallace, 189.



Figures 5–7: Teek searches for a term for gestation which will not make her uncomfortable. *Pregnant Butch*, p. 3. Copyright © 2014 by A.K. Summers from *Pregnant Butch*. Reprinted by permission of Soft Skull, an imprint of Counterpoint.

The people that make maternity clothes clearly have thought about how masculinizing the physical changes of pregnancy can be, and have therefore designed maternity clothes to re-assert femininity. Why else would they invest so much time and attention in making maternity clothes so very feminine? . . . The secret advantage to this is that without the maternity clothes, no-one knows you are pregnant.<sup>54</sup>

This massive cultural investment in the femininity of pregnant people seems to indicate a profound discomfort with the clear potential for the un- or non-feminine positioning of the pregnant subject. I suggest that pregnancy is a key moment for the enforcement of gender for two reasons. The first comes down to biological essentialism. The capacity to gestate and to bear a child is frequently mobilized as a marker of the sex/gender binary: women are people who can, the argument goes, and men are people who cannot. Leaving aside the difficulties that this so-called “simple truth” encounters when it comes to intersex people, to non-binary people, to cis women who cannot become pregnant, and to trans men who can, the positioning of this truism as a crucial building block of culturally-embedded biological essentialism means that it is subject to intensely focussed protection. For what would happen to the sex/gender binary if those carrying and delivering the babies were not demonstrably female and feminine? Alternatives remain, for the most part, culturally unthinkable. The second reason is that pregnancy heralds a new life, and thus a new process of sexing and gendering. The binary must be reestablished and reinforced with every birth; better, therefore, that the process begin before birth. Establishing and enforcing the gender and sex of the bearing parent creates a favorable environment for the secure and “correct” gendering and sexing of the newborn. After all, who knows what gender or sex of baby an incorrectly, insufficiently, or insecurely gendered parent might give birth to? The necessity of these efforts, however, serves to make clear the slipperiness and the complication of bodies, genders, sexes, and lives, which refuse to conform to the dictates of any binary. These efforts also reveal the ambiguous and

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54. wallace, 190.

contradictory nature of the gendering effects of the physical changes of pregnancy when viewed through a binaristic anamorphosis.<sup>55</sup>

*Pregnant Butch* does feature one image of a pregnant man. This is part of a fantasy sequence in which Teek, drawn as Tintin, encounters Tintin's acquaintance General Alcazar, here renamed General Albumen, in a page loosely based on a scene from Hergé's *Coke en stock* (*The Red Sea Sharks*).<sup>56</sup> Intriguingly, the General, who announces himself to be pregnant, is depicted with a halo (fig. 8). This halo is clearly an effect of gender, since none of the pregnant women in the text are depicted in this way. Yet there is one other man depicted with a halo in *Pregnant Butch*; this is Teek's gynecologist, nicknamed Dr. Gay, who is drawn as St Francis of Assisi at a moment in the narrative when Teek feels intense gratitude towards him (fig. 9). This association of masculinity, pregnancy, and sanctity recalls the medieval visual motif of Eve emerging from Adam's side, an amalgamation of the successive biblical scenes in which God first removes Adam's rib and then transforms it into Eve. As Roberto Zapperi describes in *The Pregnant Man*, this motif spread through Christian iconography from the end of the eleventh century (fig. 10), first appearing in European cathedral decoration.<sup>57</sup> Zapperi characterizes the male pregnancy represented in these images as a consolidation of patriarchal power: the bearing father is not only the originator, but also the owner, protector and guide of his progeny.<sup>58</sup> This image of the pregnant man is therefore, as Jane Gilbert points out, "the very emblem of social and religious orthodoxy," uniting father, feudal lord, cleric and Creator in a single image of male authority.<sup>59</sup>

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55. For a fascinating exploration of some of the ways in which medieval thought strove to make sense of the functioning of reproduction and pregnancy, and the existential status of the pregnant person, see Miranda Griffin, "Animal Origins in *Perceforest*," *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes* 21 (2011): 169-84.

56. Hergé, *Coke en stock* (Tournai: Casterman, 1958); *The Red Sea Sharks*, trans. Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner (York: Methuen, 1960).

57. Roberto Zapperi, *The Pregnant Man*, 4th ed., trans. Brian Williams (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1991), 3-4.

58. Zapperi, 3-32.

59. Jane Gilbert, "The Practice of Gender in *Aucassin et Nicolette*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 33, no. 3 (1997): 217-28, 220.



Figure 8: Pregnant General Albumen. *Pregnant Butch*, p. 7. Copyright © 2014 by A.K. Summers from *Pregnant Butch*. Reprinted by permission of Soft Skull, an imprint of Counterpoint.

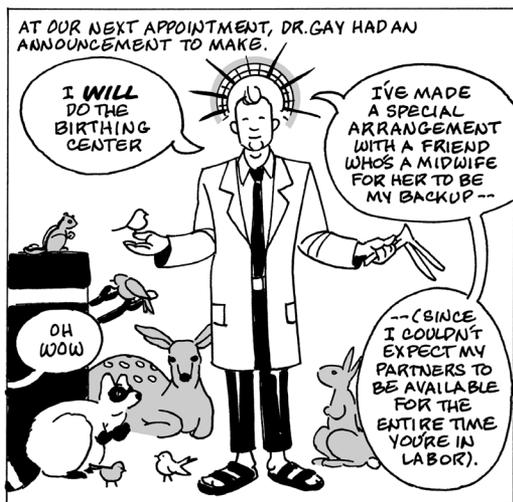


Figure 9: Dr Gay as St Francis of Assisi. *Pregnant Butch*, p. 32. Copyright © 2014 by A.K. Summers from *Pregnant Butch*. Reprinted by permission of Soft Skull, an imprint of Counterpoint.

## Male Pregnancy and Transmisogyny

It is this vein of thought regarding the pregnancy of men that Janice Raymond takes up in her transmisogynistic tract *The Transsexual Empire*. Raymond depicts trans women as at best deluded, perverted men, and at worst scheming male rapists of female identity and female spaces, whose entire bodies take on the penetrative function of the phalluses they no longer possess. Raymond's arguments are impossibly weighted against trans women; she claims that "transsexualism was developed for men, by men, according to male-defined body and role stereotypes of women," casting "transsexualism" as a patriarchal industry that reinforces gender roles and stereotypes and produces "transsexually constructed" pawns to infiltrate, control, and weaken feminist movements. Trans men are almost entirely erased, being depicted as mere

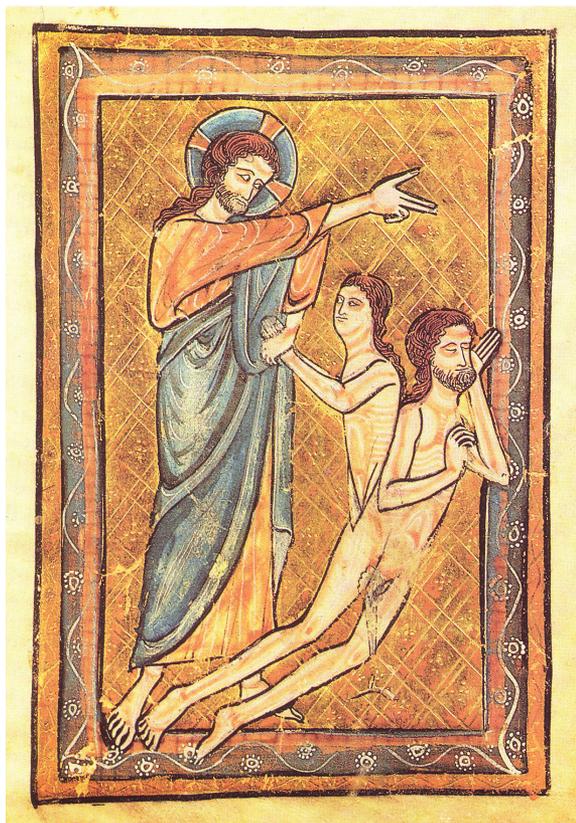


Figure 10: The birth of Eve. Illumination by William de Brailes (leaf from a psalter?), thirteenth century. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris. Photo: Jim Forest (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

“tokens,” whose function is to lend an air of egalitarian legitimacy to the “transsexists” project.<sup>60</sup> Regarding medical transition, which she presents as a rebirth, Raymond writes:

Transsexuals are living and acting out a very ancient myth, that of single parenthood by the father. This myth was prevalent in many

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60. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (London: Women’s Press, 1980), xxi. While Raymond dedicates an entire chapter to eviscerating the women she describes as “transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists” (“Sappho by Surgery,” *Transsexual Empire*, 99–119), she does not believe that gay trans men even exist, asking: “Why are there no female-to-constructed-male transsexuals . . . who are seeking to “pass” as homosexual men?” (203, 104n5).

religious traditions, including the Jewish, Greek, and Christian. Eve was born of Adam; Dionysus and Athena were born of Zeus; and Jesus was generated by God the Father in his godly birth. (Mary was a mere receptacle used to conform Jesus to earthly birth standards.) . . . Thus the transsexual who claims to be a lesbian-feminist *seems* to be the man who creates himself in *woman's* image. This, however, is deceptive, for note that he is still created in *man's* image since he is essentially a child of the Father (in this case, the medical fathers), renouncing his mothered birth.<sup>61</sup>

Here we seem to have come full circle, with both trans men and trans women implicated in the phenomenon of male pregnancy and birth, albeit by very different discourses and with very different connotations. Any notion of circularity, however, is antithetical to Raymond's understanding of sex/gender, which is radically binaristic and separatistic. Raymond is culpable, in the grossest terms, of the essentialism that she claims to combat; her entire argument against the validity of trans identities is based upon an insistence on the biological definability and separability of the sexes/genders, as well as on a refusal to acknowledge the existence of trans men, which allows her to depict trans women as an anomaly engineered by "male" science. Ironically, Raymond's fixation on the metaphorical "male pregnancy" of the "transsexuals" with their "constructed" trans women blinds her to the genuine pregnancies of the trans men whose existence she denies. Furthermore, the "medical fathers" whom Raymond declares responsible for the "birth" of trans women are hardly the eager Frankensteins she makes them out to be. In "Divided Sisterhood," a critical review of *The Transsexual Empire* first published in the same year as Raymond's book, Carol Riddell writes:

Gender identity clinics were not regarded with favour by most of the medical patriarchy. They were established and exist against the opposition of the most patriarchal and respectable elements of the medical profession, men who regard trans-sexualism as an even more disgusting aberration than Janice Raymond does, if possible.<sup>62</sup>

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61. Raymond, 106.

62. Carol Riddell, "Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and

Thus the impetus for trans women's medical transition clearly originates with the women themselves, negating Raymond's claims of any kind of "fathered" rebirth.

In addition, although Raymond reaches as far back as Zeus's thigh pregnancy with Dionysus and the birth of Eve from the side of Adam to demonstrate the longevity of the concept of male pregnancy, she refuses to recognize the long history of non-cis identities.<sup>63</sup> It is only Raymond's ignorance of—or refusal to acknowledge—the panhistorical and pancultural existence of trans people that allows her to present her vision of the "transsexual empire" as the product of a very particular time, place, and social configuration.<sup>64</sup> Raymond's writing makes clear the absolute necessity of an integrated historical perspective on trans and gender nonconforming identities. Without an awareness of our long history, we are left vulnerable to ignorant ideological attacks in the present. Transgender readings of texts from all eras help to develop this perspective, as they both demonstrate the possibilities that these texts contain for thinking and understanding queerly and provide insight into trans anamorphoses for modern non-trans readers. The more familiar trans perspectives become, the less they can be denied or marginalized.

## Looking Back and Seeing Differently

When Lacan looked back at *The Ambassadors*, he saw the scene

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Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 144-58, 151.

63. I differentiate Dionysus's birth from Zeus's thigh from Saint Anne's birth from Saint Fanuel's thigh because Dionysus's gestation did not begin in his parent's thigh. Zeus impregnated a mortal woman, Semele, and transplanted the unborn Dionysus to his own thigh after accidentally causing her death so that the pregnancy could continue to term.

64. This despite the fact that, as Riddell points out ("Divided Sisterhood," 151), one of Raymond's cited sources, Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, includes an appendix by Richard Green entitled "Transsexualism: Mythological, Historical, and Cross-Cultural Aspects." This text refers in its first paragraph to "the widespread pervasiveness of the transsexual phenomenon." Richard Green, "Appendix C: Transsexualism: Mythological, Historical, and Cross-Cultural Aspects," in Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 173-86, 173.

transformed by the appearance of a *memento mori*. My suggestion is that by looking back through trans anamorphoses and engaging with what seems familiar in medieval texts, we can see the opposite: an affirmation of lives and of identities. Then, by means of the crooked path of anamorphosis, we can link these back to our present existences. This is more than a question of willful or wishful interpretation. As Stockton writes:

I find it too easy and imprecise to say that I saw what I wanted to see in the fictions I read. . . . The thing I would now call “what I wanted” — that I would now say shaped my reading — has been shaped in part by what I started seeing, part of which I didn’t see coming at all.<sup>65</sup>

Trans readings are shaped by trans anamorphoses. But every reading is defined by the scope of its reader’s experiences and understanding. By asserting the validity of trans readings we assert the validity of trans perspectives and the reality of trans existence. Identity entails seeing from a particular subject position, and an increased number of available readings means an increased number of subject positions—or anamorphoses—which are socially visible and legible. Furthermore, a change of perspective can be immensely productive for the analysis and understanding of the range of potential significations offered by a text. Thus, trans anamorphoses are not only relevant to transgender individuals, for whom they operate along pathways of recognition: by exposing the connections that other gazes have missed, these anamorphoses serve, too, to open possibilities of discovery and comprehension for cisgender individuals. Anamorphoses which are not one’s own, like the skull in Holbein’s painting, indicate when glimpsed that there are other ways of seeing and understanding, and other meanings waiting to be discovered, only requiring an altered viewpoint. The perspectives and significations that seem just beyond reach are those which encourage us to continue to expand the ways in which we think and understand, and thus to expand the range of possible identifications—ways of seeing and reading, of experiencing, engaging and relating—to which we

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65. Stockton, *Queer Child*, 10.

have access. As Stockton suggests in the passage quoted above, we may discover our selves through experiments of reading and identifying. By reading through trans anamorphoses we can forge meaningful connections—what Dinshaw describes as “communities across time”—even if the mirror can never be crossed.

*University of Michigan*