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Transgender Genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes the use of transgender theory within medieval studies as both a productive and a politically significant optic. The article employs transgender theory to effect a new reading of the miraculous transformation of the character of Blanchandin/e, in the fourteenth-century French *chanson de geste*, *Tristan de Nanteuil*, from female to male. First, the often-overlooked importance of Judith Butler's analysis of sex and gender for the understanding of transgender and non-normatively-gendered identities is addressed. Next, using theoretical work by Deleuze, and by Deleuze and Guattari, the article demonstrates how the rhizomatic and folding structures that a transgender reading of Blanchandin/e's transformation brings to light cohere with the series of rhizomes and folds which structure the genealogical logic of the text as a whole. The family tree of *Tristan de Nanteuil* is shown to answer to queer, rhizomatic, and folding imperatives. In this way, the article demonstrates that the text's transgender genealogy contradicts the anti-generative model of queerness proposed by queer theory's antisocial turn.

This is a manifesto for transgender theory in medieval studies. Much influential scholarship has addressed the productive combination of medieval literary texts and modern queer theory — yet, to date, the questions of gender explored by these works have been analyzed almost exclusively through a prism of sexuality, rather than one of gender identity. Writing about medieval characters who enact or experience sex/gender transitions or transformations, scholars habitually fall back on terms such as "biological identity" (Campbell 2007, 86) and "sex change" (Leverage 2008, 517), which betray a lack of awareness of modern transgender theory. Also employed, although less frequently, are terms that stigmatize transgender individuals, such as "he-she" as a noun (Sautman 2001, 204), or "it" as a personal pronoun (Weisl 2009, 132). Both these categories of linguistic choice bespeak assumptions regarding gender that lack subtlety, and that therefore limit the scope of analysis. All too often, understanding of gender identities that cross normative boundaries is flattened into assumptions of transvestism, and/or judged to function as a means of covertly expressing homosexuality.[1]

This is not to say that medieval texts only — or ever — offer narratives of gender transformation that conform straightforwardly to the terms of modern transgender theory. Rather,

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my contention is that the application of transgender theory to the analysis of these texts opens new and more nuanced ways of thinking and understanding medieval texts of sex/gender transformation. The insights of transgender theory reveal productive possibilities for reading and comprehension, just as the insights of gay and lesbian studies do.[2] Finally, in the current sociopolitical climate, transgender readings fulfill a crucial political function. When transphobic rhetoric portrays non-normative gender as a recent phenomenon constituting a threat to "nature" and "normality," transgender readings of medieval texts offer a powerful and valuable corrective to this dangerous misrepresentation, by demonstrating that the theorization and discussion of non-normative gender is in evidence throughout recorded history. For all these reasons, engagement with transgender theory within medieval studies is of critical importance.[3]

Transgender genealogy: turns, folds and rhizomes

In this article, I analyze the unexpected functioning of a life marked out as queer within the universe of *chanson de geste*, a genre constitutively preoccupied with genealogy and filiation. I explore the presentation of a family tree in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, an anonymous, mid-fourteenth-century French text that forms the sixth and final part of the *Doon de Mayence* cycle.[4] This family tree undergoes a process of folding such that its neat and predictable arborescent structure is reworked into something more closely resembling a rhizome, as it is reshaped to encompass the miraculous transformation of the character of Blanchandin/e from female to male, and to reflect the complexity of her/his family ties. Blanchandin/e's queer trajectory results not, as queer theory's antisocial turn might lead us to expect, in the subversion of genealogical expectations, but rather in the fulfillment of genealogical necessity: s/he is mother to one child, and father to another, and her body is transformed in order that he can father Saint Gilles. Scholars who have previously addressed this aspect of the narrative have tended to analyze Blanchandin/e's transformation in terms of lesbian identity refracted into normative (and generative) heterosexuality.[5] Peggy McCracken's acute analysis of *Tristan de Nanteuil* comes tantalizingly close to addressing transgender questions when she presents gendered anatomy in the terms of the Derridean supplement (2017, 151–54).[6] Following on from McCracken's work, in this article I analyze Blanchandin/e's shifting subject position by way of transgender theory, making use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of the rhizome and Deleuze's theorization of the fold. This reading reveals the coherence of the rhizomatic and folded structures dictating Blanchandine's gender trajectory with the series of rhizomes and folds that pattern the generative and genealogical logic of the text as a whole. Thus, I demonstrate how transgender genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil* contradicts the model of queerness proposed by queer theory's antisocial turn.

The antisocial turn associates queer lives and queer ways of living with resistance to, or alienation from, normative social structures. Lee Edelman (2004) defines queerness as inherently antithetical not only to reproduction, but to the futurism which a commitment to reproduction entails. Jack Halberstam characterizes queer failure as a deliberate, transgressive act: a refusal to conform to social norms, or to define the contours of one's life according to society's entrenched expectations. Yet, he writes:

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (2011, 2–3)

Blanchandin/e is a medieval literary hero/ine whose way of being in the world is indeed surprising. S/he exists in creative, cooperative ways — yet her/his queerness is marked by a turn towards society's familial and reproductive demands, rather than away from them. A transgender reading of her/his narrative reveals productive resonances between medieval texts and modern trans theory, in addition to demonstrating the overlooked potential of transgender, as opposed to homosexual, optics in deciphering the complex interactions of the "sex-gender-sexuality nexus" (Mills 2015, 86). I will also revisit some of Judith Butler's earliest work, the implications of which are profoundly relevant to understanding not only transgender subjectivity, but also the construction of the frameworks that delimit "normal" and "natural" gender, and manufacture the divide between transgender and cisgender (non-transgender) identities in the first place.

While Butler's articulation and analysis of the processes by which sex and gender are constructed, enforced, and normalized are by now very familiar, some of the most radical implications of her theorization are yet to be fully explored. Here I will consider aspects of her work in relation to what it is to be transgender. Butler elucidates the functioning of the normative signifying chain of (binary) sex/(heterosexualized) gender/(hetero)sexuality, which is presented as natural and inevitable, by revealing the originary move in which sex is *constructed as* "the radically unconstructed" by means of "casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain" where its questioning is rendered impossible ([1990] 2006, 10). On this supposedly stable basis of binary, opposing sexes, heterosexuality is then formulated:

> Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that "being" lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail. (1991, 20–21)

Butler's insight that gender, although presented as the automatic intermediate factor linking sex and sexuality, is in fact performative and iterative, gives the lie to the notion of heterosexuality's primacy. She writes:

> *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect … heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself — *and failing*. (1991, 21)

It is the inevitability of this failure which ensures that heterosexualized genders, as well as heterosexuality itself, will continue to be iteratively enacted, in the ceaseless necessity of producing the phantasmatic ideal which is presented as always already in place. This demonstration of the ways in which (binary, heterosexualized) gender is fundamentally imbricated in the construction of (compulsory) heterosexuality provides indispensable illumination of the entangled nature of this sector of the sex-gender-sexuality nexus. Butler further demonstrates that the attribution of "masculinity" to those categorized as "male," and "femininity" to those categorized as "female," is never natural, but always a cultural imposition subject to enforced performative reinforcement. That is to say, there is "no 'proper' gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another" (1991, 21), nor is sex itself "proper" or "natural," since it is always already a gendered category, constructed through and by means of the gender it is claimed to precede and to occasion. Gender, it turns out, "must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" ([1990] 2006, 10).

Thus, the entire signifying chain collapses. Sexuality is no longer dependent on gender, and neither has a "correct" embodiment or expression. Heterosexuality is neither inevitable nor original, and homosexuality cannot, therefore, be reduced to a flawed attempt to mirror it. Nor is gender the consequence of a stable and natural sex, since this "attribute" determines the nature of its supposed cause. The signifying sequence — of original and copy, of cause and effect — is impossible to sustain, since the positions continually converge (1991, 22). Hence, the genders of transgender individuals are no more illusory than those of their cisgender counterparts — there is nothing fastening particular genders to particular genitals, nor do body parts dictate sex. Gender is the primary characteristic, since the body has no sex that is prior to gendering processes. Thus, as Butler writes, "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" ([1990] 2006, 11).

Nevertheless, the notion of sexual sequence endures, for the simple reason that it is only by maintaining the propriety of the conventional signifying chain of (binary) sex/ (heterosexualized) gender/(hetero)sexuality, and relegating homosexuality to the status of imitation, that heterosexuality can secure its position as both normal and natural. A corollary of this process — one that is more at the forefront of public awareness in this era of "bathroom bills" — dictates that transgender identities are but secondary imitations of "natural" gender. Butler's description of her own experiences of lesbian identity apply with striking precision to transgender lives:

> I suffered for a long time … from being told, explicitly or implicitly, that what I "am" is a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real. (1991, 20)

The word "transgender" itself indicates crossing from one side to another, entrenching notions both of binary genders, and of the rejection of an originary (and "natural") designation or location, within the very term used to categorize the individuals to whom these notions seem least natural. What appear to be the edges of the regulatory system of sex and gender (or the symbolic order) are nonetheless clearly imprinted with the system's insignia. Thus, despite the shift in focus from the previously accepted term "transsexual" (largely rejected as overly-medicalized and evocative of genital prurience), the specter of "sex" lingers. Those who experience being — and describe themselves as — counter to, unaccounted for by, and/or demonstrative of the inadequacies of the regulatory system are constrained to do so in the terms of the system itself, such that the first step in acknowledging or assuming an identity which the regulatory system does not sanction must always be to construct the self as "wrong" or "unnatural" in the terms of the system. We might, however, read "transgender" more generously. The aspect of spatial relocation that the term encapsulates can be envisioned as indicating the journey from where one has been incorrectly or unsatisfactorily placed to somewhere more correct, or more natural. In light of the profound and life-long impact of neonatal gender assignment, it is perhaps surprising that the vast majority of people deems such relocation unnecessary, and is satisfied to remain more-or-less encapsulated by the limiting, binary category to which they were assigned.

This notion of spatial displacement, in the form of crossing, persists in much of the terminology used to describe and to label non-normatively-gendered individuals. These terms include "cross-dressing," "cross-identification," and the acronyms "MTF" ("male-to-female") and "FTM" ("female-to-male"). Each of these terms expresses non-normative gender identities only in terms of their relation to the normative sex/gender system, framing the identities to which they refer as spatial trajectories from a place of origin to a new (and implicitly less

"natural") destination, or as a layering or accretion of identity upon an original, foundational ("natural") identity. This vocabulary entrenches the perception of non-normatively-gendered identities as secondary, imitative, unnatural, and deceptive, since the construction of each term privileges the "natural" identity against which its "unnatural" counterpart is offset. More neutral terms, such as "trans man" and "trans woman," in contrast, present an individual's sex/gender as substance, and the adjectival qualifier "trans" as accident. These terms have their counterparts in the terms "cis man" and "cis woman," "cisgender" (or "cis") being the antonym of "transgender" (or "trans"). Although the Latin prefixes "cis" (on this side) and "trans" (across) still denote a spatialized difference in gendered experience, the presentation of the journey (or transition) of "trans" as a personal trajectory whose start and end points need not be rigidly defined in the terms of the framework of the normative sex/gender system gestures towards independence from that framework. This latter formulation corresponds not to the inflexible and arborescent binary system of sex/gender categorization that is embedded in much of Western culture and its social structures, but rather to a rhizomatic model which offers a more productive and flexible format for the understanding and analysis of sex/gender and its trajectories.

The structure of a rhizome is, of course, entirely different to that of tree-like systems. While arborescent networks resemble a tracing or a photograph, characterized by repetition and indexicality, the rhizome is better represented by a highly responsive, ever-expanding and ever-changing map. Deleuze and Guattari write:

> Tout autre est le rhizome, *carte et non pas calque* … Si la carte s'oppose au calque, c'est qu'elle est tout entière tournée vers une expérimentation en prise sur le réel. La carte ne reproduit pas un inconscient fermé sur lui-même, elle le construit … La carte est ouverte, elle est connectable dans toutes ses dimensions, démontable, renversable, susceptible de recevoir constamment des modifications. Elle peut être déchirée, renversée, s'adapter à des montages de toute nature, être mise en chantier par un individu, un groupe, une formation sociale. (1980, 20)

> The rhizome is altogether different, a *map and not a tracing.* … What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. … The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. (1987, 12)

A rhizomatic system rejects rigid constructions of gender, replacing boundaries and regulations with unlimited possibilities. Rhizomatic gender responds to the lived experiences of human existence, rather than attempting to describe or prescribe these experiences in terms of an inflexible framework. The notion of *mise en chantier* (reworking) resonates strongly with the praxis of modern gender theorists and activists, who are transforming how gender is conceived and experienced. Despite backlash, non-normative gender is now more visible and more accepted than ever before. This is, therefore, a propitious moment in transgender history to examine medieval constructions of gender.

Another theoretical framework which, in concert with the rhizome, can help to illuminate the workings both of gender and of other structural features within *Tristan de Nanteuil* is Deleuze's conceptualization of the fold. This theorization presents the fold as the defining formative element of both matter and thought. All forms are conceived of as being constructed through processes of folding and unfolding; changes and developments, too, are considered in terms of folding, unfolding or refolding. Fold leads to fold, like dominos falling in a chain reaction, following the predetermined and repeating patterns which are

innate to each formation, or responding to the external pressure of environmental forces. As Deleuze writes:

> un corps flexible ou élastique a encore des parties cohérentes qui forment un pli, si bien qu'elles ne se séparent pas en parties de parties, mais plutôt se divisent à l'infini en plis de plus en plus petits qui gardent toujours une certaine cohésion. Aussi le labyrinthe du continu n'est pas une ligne qui se dissoudrait en points indépendants, comme le sable fluide en grains, mais *comme une étoffe ou une feuille de papier qui se divise en plis à l'infini* ou se décompose en mouvements courbes, chacun déterminé par l'entourage consistant ou conspirant. (1988, 9; emphasis added)

> a flexible or an elastic body still has cohering parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity in smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion. Thus [the labyrinth of continuity] is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but *resembles (a cloth or) a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds* or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings. (1993, 6; emphasis added)[7]

Deleuze's conception of the fold presents the differences between beings and their existences as the result of variations in directional trajectories. The paradigm therefore permits a conceptualization of the differences between subjects which is able to account for variations in configurations of existence and of relating to others, conceived as diversity of spatial disposition and directional impulse, while retaining both an underlying identity of composition and the constant potential for fluid movement or folding into different formations. Similarly, a rhizome's form is never definitive; it is never a closed system, but always remains open and volatile. There are always new possibilities, one of which is flight from a rigid dichotomy that appears to offer only two choices. Some of these lines of flight are perceptible in medieval narratives that depict non-normatively-gendered characters, actions or attractions. By reading rhizomatically, along lines which eschew binary limitations, or by tracing the constitutive folds of non-normative characters and relational permutations, it is possible to read the transgender and gender non-conforming possibilities which exist in medieval texts in spite of the cultural imperatives, both medieval and modern, which may endeavor to render them illegible.

Blanchandin/e

Blanchandin/e is the first wife of *Tristan de Nanteuil*'s eponymous Tristan; she is a Saracen princess who converts to Christianity and, following her miraculous transformation into a man, becomes his former husband's knightly brother-in-arms. Blanchandin/e's rhizomatic trajectory, and the folds which define her/him, intriguingly represent overtly queer moves that nonetheless lead toward heteronormativity. Analysis of this trajectory also reveals the interactions between the preoccupation with genealogy and filiation that is constitutive to *chanson de geste* as a genre, and the increasingly fantastical elements that appear in later *chansons*.[8]

Genealogy is the fundamental narrative motor in *chanson de geste*. There is always demand for the conception of more heroes, and (paternal) heritage is decisive in determining chivalric worth. R. Howard Bloch writes:

> The lineal family model is predicated upon the principles of partial resemblance, contiguity, and, above all, continuity. Thus the son reproduces the father, accedes to the paternal name, title, heraldic sign, and land. He represents an essential link in a genealogical chain, each part

of which shares certain common traits with all others, and which, at least in theory if not in practice, remains unbroken from the first ancestor to the current heir. (1983, 86)

In order to bring about this resemblance between father and son, however, it is sometimes necessary first to bring about, in the name of the son whose existence hangs in the balance, changes to the status and identity of the father. There appear to be three key factors in producing the kind of heroism that can be transmitted to descendants in the *chanson de geste* context. The first is twofold, comprising nobility and chivalry. These are usually coextensive in *chanson de geste*, where noble birth almost always equates to chivalric potential. The nuclear family unit of Tristan de Nanteuil, Blanchandine, and their son Raimon, makes a useful case study. Tristan, despite illustrious lineage, is strikingly unknightly at the time when Raimon is conceived. Tristan has grown up in the forest, far from human society; when Blanchandine first explains the nature of chivalry to him he is unimpressed, failing to see the virtue in violence. Nevertheless, he has clearly inherited his father's martial abilities, although this legacy is slow to be revealed. Instinctively fleeing a group of scouts sent by Blanchandine's father to return his missing daughter, whom he intends to give in marriage against her will, Tristan leaves her to be captured. Although anxious to be reunited with his *amie*, he has no sense of chivalric duty or personal honor; he persuades a friend to fight in his place, declaring: "je n'ay de combatre nulle devocïon, / Ains suis le plus couart qui soit en nul royon" (I have no desire to fight; rather, I am the greatest coward there is in any kingdom; 6927–28).[9] It is not until he encounters a fairy, Gloriande, who engineers a trial intended to endow him with courage, that Tristan begins to discover his potential. Gloriande explains, however, that he will not benefit from this gift until he has been baptized. She goes on to reveal to Tristan his name, his heritage, the events which led to his upbringing in the forest, and the destiny of his son Raimon; the fundamental intertwining of chivalry with Christianity, as well as with personal and family identity, is evident. The link between lineage and knighthood is further consolidated by Gloriande's instructions to Tristan that it is incumbent upon him to free various family members from captivity, now that he is a knight.

Tristan next visits a castle where he meets King Arthur, and succeeds in sounding a horn which tests valor. In this way, Tristan confirms his knightly prowess, and thus effects his reinsertion into the chivalric lineage of his paternal line. Gloriande explains to Tristan that, due to his ancestry, he will have no equal as a knight. With aporetic or circular logic, chivalry can only be achieved if it is already innately present: training or supernatural intervention may be required, but the implication is always that such measures only release or build upon pre-existing aptitudes. In a rhizomatic temporal relationship, cause and effect interact in a strikingly non-linear fashion. Thus, Tristan is able to pass on his knightly potential to Raimon even before this potential is activated within him, and before he has assumed his place in the chivalric lineage to which he retrospectively appears always already to have belonged. It remains clear, however, that Tristan could not have accessed this position without the training he received from Gloriande. Thus, his chivalry remained dependent upon an outside intervention, whose occurrence was uncertain at the time when Raimon was conceived, yet without which the knightly genealogy within which Raimon, too, will take his place would have remained fractured.

The second requisite for heritable heroism is Christianity, which enhances chivalry; as Gloriande tells Tristan, he must be baptized before her gift will take effect, since "il n'est nul qui puist avoir ceur de proudon, / S'il n'est bon chrestïens sans mauvaise achoison" (no-one can have the heart of a worthy man if he is not a good Christian, without bad intention;

8421–22). The link between Christianity and ancestry is complex. Nominally baptism is the universal standard: through baptism, anyone can become Christian, and no-one is Christian without it. However, once again there exists a kind of circularity in the logic of Christianity in regard to lineage. Those born to Christian parents but deprived of religious education, such as Tristan, are given the benefit of the doubt: it is assumed that they possess an innate inclination towards Christianity which, in a similar manner to the acquisition of chivalry, can be confirmed and strengthened by means of eventual baptism. It is notable, for example, that although both Gloriande and Arthur urge Tristan to seek baptism in order to enhance his knightly prowess, even before baptism Tristan is able pass the test of the horn. Once again, the temporal relationship between cause and effect is rhizomatic rather than linear: the fact that Tristan can sound the magic horn before his baptism points to the *necessity* of baptism, the future event whose certain occurrence secures Tristan's existential/ontological status as always-already-going-to-have-been-baptized (and thus always already noble and knightly, the very status which baptism ensures), rather than serving as evidence that baptism is unnecessary. Thus, crucially, Tristan is able to sound the horn *before* baptism — not *without* baptism, since the rhizomatic temporal paradigm rests on the event of his baptism as a reference point, which can then be folded into a temporal frame where it has not yet occurred, in order that the effects of this event may be felt. The potential unleashed by this folding paradoxically (or rather, rhizomatically) renders baptism even more crucial, since if it were never to be realized, the events and status which its inevitability retroactively ensured would be falsified, rendering the form of the system untenable, and (since rhizomes do not simply collapse) resulting in its transformation — or folding — into a new shape. A similar logic applies in the case of "good" Saracens such as Blanchandine, who are always already marked by their (potential for) future conversion. Thus, despite the importance of Christianity for true chivalry, the fact that neither Tristan nor Blanchandine is baptized when Raimon is born bears no consequence for his knightly potential. The certainty of their eventual baptisms works to secure Raimon in a position of pre-emptive Christianity — and if he himself is ever baptized, this fact is not mentioned by the text.

The third requirement for the transmission of heroism is, as a rule, male identity, which is demonstrated to have more in common with Christianity than it does with nobility and chivalry, since both male identity and Christianity can theoretically be acquired, and both emanate from God. We have established that Tristan, possessing the three traits of a *chanson de geste* hero, is able to transmit this heroism to Raimon. However, the heroic family tree — the anti-arborescent progression of which means that it might more accurately be described as a genealogical rhizome — continually strives to produce more heroes. About three years after she has given birth to Raimon, Blanchandine is transformed into a man, and subsequently takes the name Blanchandin. This transformation is insistently prefigured throughout the text; the first mention of Blanchandin/e describes her/him as:

… ung roy que Jhesus voult changer
En figure d'un home, car devant femmë yert;
…
Celle fut Blanchandine d'Ermenie arrier,
Mais par grande miracle la voult Dieu figurer
En figure d'un home pour son non essaucer,

Et engendra saint Gille[.] (377–78, 380–83)

> … a king whom it pleased Jesus to change into the form of a man, because before [s/he] was a woman[.] … She was previously Blanchandine of Armenia, but, by a great miracle, it pleased God to form her into the form of a man in order that His name should be exalted; and he [Blanchandin] engendered Saint Gilles.

This first reference to Blanchandine thus clearly frames her transformation in relation to the son that Blanchandin will father, establishing genealogical necessity as the reason for the miracle. Once again, rhizomatic temporality is in evidence, since the sequence of events requires a future reference point to ensure the occurrence of an event without which the future reference point could not exist: it is for the sake of the son who is always already going to have been engendered that Blanchandine must become the man who can engender him.

A summary of the events leading up to the transformation is now in order. Blanchandine, now baptized, and in hiding from her father, is disguised as a knight and known as Blanchandin. Clarinde, the Sultan's daughter, falls in love with "Blanchandin," and decides to marry "him." As a stalling strategy, Blanchandine says that she cannot marry or sleep with Clarinde unless the latter converts to Christianity, but Clarinde becomes increasingly insistent. With Tristan missing and presumed dead, Blanchandine's friends encourage her to keep the peace by marrying Clarinde, but to refuse to sleep with her wife until Clarinde has converted to Christianity, in order that she need not reveal her body. This pretext, it is hoped, will buy enough time to plan an escape. Therefore, the couple are married. However, a messenger recognizes Blanchandine despite the disguise, and tells Clarinde that her husband is actually a woman. Clarinde determines to put her husband to the test by demanding that he bathe with her, and Blanchandine eventually has little choice but to follow her wife to the tub. At this moment, however, a large stag erupts into the palace, causing chaos; the narrator informs us that the stag is an instrument of God's will. Blanchandine seizes a sword, and chases the stag out of the palace and away into the countryside.

Blanchandine now possesses two of the three criteria that we have established as necessary for the transmission of heroism: as a princess and a Christian, she has the requisite ancestry, and one of the factors that enable this inheritance to be expressed. Yet her female identity prevents her from fully embodying the transmissible form of heroism that determines genealogical patterning and progression in *chanson de geste*. The passage preceding Blanchandine's transformation is markedly hagiographic in tone, linking queer trajectories to sanctity; with a sudden change in direction, the text folds itself into another genre, just as Blanchandine will soon be folded into another sex/gender. The passage begins with an exhortation to listen, in God's name, to a truthful narrative about Jesus's love for the saints. A theological status is claimed for *Tristan de Nanteuil* itself; according to the narrator, its narrative is suitable to be preached. There follows a lesson about the value of hardships endured on earth. Blanchandine's journey through the woods in pursuit of the stag is presented as a process of abjection in the mold of saintly martyrdom, and with echoes of Christ's passion. As she runs, she prays to God and the Virgin; her clothes are shredded and her flesh ripped by thorns, yet she continues willingly to subject her body to torment. One thorn even pierces her foot, clearly invoking stigmata.[10] Blanchandine continues to praise God for her pain, referencing both Christ's passion and Tristan's presumed death: she is happy to suffer for both their sakes. This painful journey culminates in the appearance of an angel, who addresses Blanchandine as follows:

> Or te mande Jhesus qui le monde estora,
> Lequel tu aymes mieulx, or ne me celles ja:
> Ou adés estre femme ainsy qu'i te crea,
> Ou devenir ungs homs? A ton vouloir sera.
> Homs sera, se tu veulx, car il te changera
> Et te donrra tout ce qu'a home appertendra.
> Or en di ton vouloir, car ainsy il sera
> Selon ta voulenté. Par moy mandé le t'a. (16142–49)

> Jesus, who made the world, now asks you which you would prefer — speak honestly: to remain a woman, as he created you, or to become a man? The choice is yours. You will be a man, if you wish, because he will change you, and give you everything that belongs to a man. Now speak your desire, because it will be according to your wish. Jesus has asked you this through me.

Blanchandine is, unsurprisingly, shocked by this offer. Her initial response is that she cannot choose; she is content to conform to God's superior wisdom and judgment, since he knows better than she what is best for her. The angel, however, insists that Blanchandine make a choice. She therefore declares that she will become a man, in order to avenge Tristan's death. In addition, she wishes to be a man so that no other man can sleep with her, since her husband is (as she believes) dead. The angel then orders Blanchandine to return to her wife, and assures her that by the time she reaches the city an archbishop will have arrived, who can baptize Clarinde. Following the baptism, the couple is encouraged to have sex, since they will conceive a son, Saint Gilles. The angel then departs, leaving Blanchandine alone in the wood, where her body is transformed:

> Nouvelle char lui vint, en aultre se mua
> Et devvint ung vrais homs, car Dieu lui envoya
> Toute nature de home tant que besoing en a
> En maniere d'un home et tout lui ottroya,
> Mais oncques son semblant qu'ot devant ne changa.
> La fut homs Blanchandine et sy endroit faurra
> Le non de Blanchandine, car appellés sera
> Blanchandins d'ores mes, car bien appertendra.
> Quant se vit transmué, Jhesus Crist en loa. (16196–204)

> New flesh came to her, she changed into another, and became a real man, because God sent her the entire nature of a man, everything which is required in the form of a man, and he gave it all to her; but the [face/manner/opinions] which she had before never changed. There Blanchandine was, a man: and the name Blanchandine will stop right here, because from now on he will be called Blanchandin, which will suit him better. When he saw himself transformed, he praised Jesus Christ.

What is particularly striking about this scene is that Blanchandine's transformation is presented as a choice. *Yde et Olive*, a *chanson de geste* dated to the thirteenth century, culminates in a very similar fashion, with a potentially disastrous bathing scene circumvented by the appearance of an angel. The difference is that Yde's body is simply transformed, with no reference whatsoever to Yde's own wishes, either before or after the change is enacted.[11] Yet whether Blanchandine is really free to make this choice is debatable. Her reasons for becoming a man hinge on Tristan's supposed death: she wants to avenge him, and to cease to be a woman if she cannot be his wife. Yet Tristan is not, in fact, dead: Doon, his half-brother, is riding after Blanchandine to bring the good news. Doon reaches Blanchandin minutes after his transformation, at which point he expresses regret over his decision, swearing that

he would never willingly have parted from Tristan, and adding that their separation is now definitive, since: "Dieu ne le veult mye / C'oncques homs ne fist aultre en celle mortel vie" (God certainly does not wish that a man should ever have another man in this mortal life; 16283–84). Blanchandine's decision was thus made without full knowledge of the consequences; since God is omniscient, this can be no accident. Blanchandine's choice ultimately serves God's will, not her own. The purpose of the transformation is made clear by the angel once Blanchandine has given her answer, and the change has been set in motion. It is necessary for Blanchandine to become a man so that Blanchandin and Clarinde may conceive Saint Gilles. Thus, Blanchandine's "choice" serves a genealogical imperative.

It is necessary here to address the language that I have been using to talk about Blanchandine's transformation into Blanchandin. I have hesitated to employ the modern term "transition," because it implies a different process and a different understanding of identity than that which the narrative seems to present. I use the phrase "Blanchandine's transformation into Blanchandin" because this formulation seems to reflect most accurately what the text is telling us: Blanchandine is a woman, and remains a woman until her encounter with the angel, despite dressing and living as a man for several weeks. I have used the pronouns "s/he" and "her/him" to reflect the fact that the character is presented as having two different and equally valid genders in the course of the text. Blanchandine becomes Blanchandin only at the moment when her body is reshaped (or refolded), becoming *his* body. This notion of the literal "sex-change," a definitive switch from one binary sex category to the other, persists in modern discourse despite the problematic foundations on which the concept is constructed. The notion of the "sex-change" grounds sex/gender in bodily classification and assigns it the status of biological "truth." Such a truth can be uncovered by means of uncovering bodies, as is illustrated by Clarinde's attempts to force Blanchandine to bathe with her. The notion of the "sex-change" rests not only on a straightforward sex binarism, which is easily and unequivocally diagnosable, but also on a simplistic view of anchoring within these categories. In short, having erased intersex bodies in order to reduce sex to two clear and discrete categories, this logic then locates sex solely in the body (and mostly in the genitals). The signifying chain of sex/gender/sexuality is thus collapsed in on itself, reformulated into the single, ostensibly undeniable attribute of sex, cast as a stable, bodily binary, and located within a prediscursive domain where it cannot be subject to interrogation or questioning. Yet, as Butler indicates, "this production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*" ([1990] 2006, 10). It is gender that necessitates such insistence on the rigid categorization of sex: the malleability and fluidity of gender threatens to unsettle the fixity of sex, and to reveal the always already gendered nature of its construction. Thus it becomes necessary, precisely because of the destabilizing effect of the interactions of sex and gender, to deny that these interactions take place, and to attempt to locate sex beyond gender's reach. However, as Butler points out, "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" ([1990] 2006, 10). The notion of gender precedes and establishes sex, only to posit itself as an effect of sex, in a variation on the rhizomatic temporal logic which we have observed at work in several structures, which thereby present themselves as inevitable. The appeal is then made to sex to stabilize gender, casting sex as gender's origin.

This complex interweaving of sex and gender is intended to disguise the fact that "physical sex" is less a biological truth than a social construct produced through the compulsory gendering of particular bodily morphology, on the basis of which the lives of the individuals

Figure 1. "Transitioning doesn't make you a girl. Being a girl might make you transition." Tweet by @NullBlanc. September 15, 2016. Accessed March 28, 2018. https://twitter.com/nullblanc/status/776310606097809408.

possessing those morphologies are then further gendered and policed. "Sex-changes" do not exist, because the construction of "sex" on which this concept is predicated is no more than a sociocultural fantasy — and transgender subjects are those for whom this fantasy rings most false. Non-normatively-gendered individuals are subjects whose lived experience has viscerally demonstrated to them that the sociocultural fantasy of the natural and automatic congruence of sex/gender/sexuality is in no way natural or inevitable. A tweet by Twitter user @NullBlanc (Figure 1) expresses a much more complex conception of what it is to be transgender, concisely summing up a narrative which many trans people feel reflects their experience. Once again, we are confronted with a rhizomatic temporality which negates the dictatorial power of what might be read as linear cause and effect: the apparent end result of transition is in fact the catalyst which sets the process in motion. Similarly, the destination of transition is, paradoxically, both a new subject position, which comes with its own strangeness, and a natural and comfortable return to where the subject has never been — and yet always was. The self may not have been folded in this way before, yet the creases are already prepared, making the adjustment a peculiar mixture of newness and familiarity.

Gender identity is thus not a willful decision, with a "before" and an "after," but rather a deep and innate sense of who one (always already) is. Trans people do not transition because they *want to be* a man, a woman, or non-binary, but because they already know who they are, and desire congruence between their internal sense of their own identity, their appearance, and the way in which other people relate to them. Although Blanchandine's story in some ways parallels a familiar modern transition narrative — in that she first undertakes social transition, dressing as a knight and being known and treated as the young man Blanchandin, before, in medieval fiction's answer to medical transition, her body is transformed — this modern narrative does not quite fit. If Blanchandin were transgender as we now understand the concept, he would be "he" all along: his change to male dress and social performance would reflect, or at least catalyze, an identification with maleness, a move towards authenticity rather than a disguise. Similarly, it would already be *his* body that was transformed to match his identity. This is not simply a question of the pronouns used in the text: trans people are commonly misgendered due to judgments based on physical appearance, and the narrator's use of feminine nouns, pronouns, and adjectives could be explained in this way. What makes it tricky to categorize Blanchandin/e as transgender in the modern sense is the

fact that, until the miraculous transformation, "Blanchandin" appears to be a convenient disguise, an "esploit" (trick; 12986), rather than a genuine identity.

The presentation of Blanchandine's choice, however, is fascinating: it stages the very scene of gender selection which is, Butler reminds us, paradoxical. She writes:

> Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. ([1993] 2011, ix)

Blanchandine has lived all her life within the social and cultural category of "woman," which determines her agency and her interactions with others, and which is supposedly secured by reference to the form of her body. But when the angel presents the decision, who exactly is making a choice? Is it Blanchandine, the woman, deciding to become a man? Yet deciding to be a man is surely something that only a man would do: how can a subject securely identified as a woman decide, from within that identity, to be something else? The decision to be a man already implies a relationship to the category of maleness that a woman would not have. Are we, then, in that moment of confrontation with the angel, in fact seeing Blanchandin declare who he really already is? There may be a third alternative: with the options miraculously opened, is Blanchandine perhaps, in the moment before choosing, stripped of gender to become the impossible, pre-gendered subject which Butler invokes — impossible because it is only *through* gender that subjectivity can be achieved? In that moment, is Blanchandin(e) free of gender, free to choose which gender to become? The prospect is appealing. And yet, there can be no freedom from gender. The miraculous presentation of a choice that no one else is offered prefigures its outcome all along, even if we discount the mistaken premise of Tristan's death on the basis of which Blanchandine makes her decision. Blanchandine's first instinct was correct: she was never free to choose, since God's plan meant that the choice was always rigged. But then, as Butler tells us, gender is a system that is always rigged. It is always an external imposition, a series of exogenous folds, which individuals have limited power to control, and must attempt to negotiate as best they can.

Following the enactment of the miracle, certain aspects of Blanchandin/e's identity remain unaltered. Describing the transformation, the narrator notes that "oncques son *semblant* qu'ot devant ne changa" (the [face/manner/opinions] which she had before never changed; 16200, emphasis added). The exact nature of what it is about Blanchandin/e which does not change is not entirely clear, yet neither Tristan's half-brother Doon nor Tristan himself notices anything different when they first meet Blanchandin, with the result that he has to "come out" to them. These awkward moments are bound to resonate with modern transgender individuals, and the notion that Blanchandin's *semblant* remains unchanged, especially if the term is translated as "manner" or "opinions," also reflects the fact that transition does not entail becoming an entirely different person, but rather coming into visibility as who one (always) already was/is. In contrast, the text makes clear that Blanchandin's body is significantly altered. When Blanchandin encounters Doon in the forest soon after his transformation, it is not until Blanchandin reveals "sa char qui toute estoit changie / Par dessoubz le braiel" (his flesh, which was completely changed below the belt; 16240–41) that Doon accepts that Blanchandin is no longer a woman. Similarly, when Blanchandin returns to Clarinde's palace, he strips naked in order to resolve her doubts, and to bring the bathing trial to a triumphant conclusion. When he removes his clothes, everyone in the room sees "le membre qu'estoit gros et quarrés" (his member, which was large and

thick; 16357); Clarinde is delighted. Thus, Blanchandin's penis functions as the ultimate demonstration and corroboration of his identity, confirming sex in its phantasmatic status as secure biological truth, and assuring the integrity of the signifying chain of sex/gender/sexuality. Blanchandin's new genitals therefore metonymically indicate reproductive potential, as an inevitable outcome of his social and spatial orientation alongside other men, and in complementary opposition to women.[12]

Having experienced bodily transformation, Blanchandin must navigate the space between transgender and homosexual identities in his personal relationships, the parameters of which have shifted with the alteration of his identity. Prior to the transformation, Clarinde's pursuit of Blanchandine is seen as a joke by Tristan and Doon, who can only conceive of the relationship as a mistake. Blanchandine is teased for making a more convincing man than she "ought" to, whereas Clarinde is considered deluded. The couple's constitutive phallic lack is another subject of derision: a sexual relationship without a penis is apparently unimaginable. Tristan jokes that Clarinde may steal his wife, but this prospect does not worry him since "n'a elle chose qui la puist meciner" (she [Blanchandine] does not have anything to medicate/treat/cure her [Clarinde] with; 13345). The crude metaphor, which casts the penis as the medicine that cures the sickness of love, is repeated a few lines later. Thus the potential union of Clarinde and Blanchandine is seen as a fatally flawed imitation of a heterosexual relationship. Although neither partner is interested in being with another woman, observers visualize a homosexual couple, demonstrating the way in which relationships involving one or more individuals whose gender identity or presentation is non-normative are subjected to a shifting focalization, which tends toward erasure of non-normative gender.[13]

When, immediately after the transformation, Blanchandin learns that Tristan is alive, he declares that it is impossible for the relationship to continue, since both are now men. Nevertheless, the former lovers later develop a bond as fellow knights. Reunited after fifteen years apart, they greet each other with great emotion:

> Eulx deux cheent pasmés, et se vont embrasser.
> Ly ung commance l'autre humblement a baiser,
> Chascun des deux souspire et prent a lermoier. (20709–11)

> The two fall down in a faint, and then go to embrace one another. One begins humbly to kiss the other, and each of them sighs and begins to weep.

Tristan tells Blanchandin that he has left his wife and children to search for him, and Blanchandin replies that now he has Tristan, nothing can trouble him. This is not an unusual representation of the homosocial bond between knights, yet the pair's history as (heterosexual) lovers brings to the surface the emotional (and, potentially, physical) intimacy that often underlies homosociality. The new form into which Blanchandin has been folded has in turn altered the shape of his ongoing relationships, revealing patterns of connection which demonstrate rhizomatic temporal links. Clarinde's infatuation with "Blanchandin" prefigures and conditions, whilst simultaneously constituting a response to, the miraculous transformation, while the love that Tristan and Blanchandin continue to share remains inseparable from the configuration of their past intimacy. Tellingly, these relationships are oriented in response to genealogical demands: the trajectory of Blanchandin/e's folding and refolding answers the necessity for her/him to be both mother to Raimon, and father to Saint Gilles.

Despite not fitting neatly into modern definitions of transgender identities, Blanchandin/e is undoubtedly queer, since her/his experience calls the supposed rigidity of sex/gender roles

and boundaries into question. And queer people, the antisocial thesis tells us, are where heredity comes to an end. This thesis, however, is overturned by the fact that Blanchandin/e's queerness is oriented to serve the *chanson de geste*'s genealogical imperative. Blanchandin/e's transformation increases the number of heroes in two ways, both by installing Blanchandin as an additional hero, and by endowing him with the ability to engender another hero in his turn. Thus, not despite but *because of* his queerness, the family tree does not stop with Blanchandin; neither, however, does it extend much further. Gilles, the hermit saint, is non-reproductive by definition. Intriguingly, his father's transformation becomes an article of faith for Gilles; the miraculous tale enlightens him and turns him towards God:

> Le miracle son pere le va enluminant
> Tellement qu'a Jhesus, le pere tout poissant,
> Mist entente et courage et tout son essïent. (19768–70)

> His father's miracle enlightens him so greatly that he places his desire and his heart and all his certainty in Jesus, the all-powerful father.

Thus queerness and sanctity are again linked. A parallel between the heavenly father and the transgender father becomes evident; the miraculous transformation forges a connection between them, which is strengthened by the echoes of the passion in the fleshly mortification that Blanchandine underwent in the forest.

The family tree does not stop, then, where we might expect it to, but it does stop soon afterward. If queer theory's antisocial thesis states that queer people are where filiation ceases its effect, then Blanchandin's transformation makes him simultaneously more and less queer, as he crosses the supposedly inflexible boundaries of sex/gender in order to further the heteronormative project of procreation. The results of crossing gender lines within *chanson de geste* are revealed to be unexpectedly social. The family tree itself has now been subjected to so many folds that its structure is more rhizomatic than arborescent. The trajectory by which Blanchandin/e simultaneously occupies multiple positions in the genealogical network demonstrates how rhizomatic structuring allows the genealogical system to operate in a dimension that the standard format of the family tree could not accommodate. Deleuzian folding, meanwhile, gathers these multiple positions into a single pleat that encompasses and expresses Blanchandin/e's complex subject position.

Conclusion

Analyzing non-normative gender in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, Angela Jane Weisl refers to "the disruptive potential of gender fluidity" (2009, 128–129). Yet gender fluidity ultimately proves to be anything but disruptive within this narrative. The malleability of Blanchandin/e's gender enables the crucial genealogical impetus of the text; her/his transformation is extremely practical in both purpose and effect. Given the role of procreation in driving the narrative, and the emphasis placed on Saint Gilles' parentage, it is in fact gender rigidity which would be intensely disruptive to the text's trajectory. Blanchandin/e clearly displays the "creative … cooperative … surprising ways of being in the world" which Halberstam invokes (2011, 2–3), as s/he turns away from antisociality and towards queer forms of sociality, family, and community. Blanchandin/e's folds, and her/his rhizomatic gender configuration, both shape and are shaped by her/his non-normative spatial and orientational positionings,

as s/he exists in ways that the regulatory framework of normative sex/gender/sexuality struggles to account for.

Is there, then, something inherently rhizomatic, or even non- or anti-systematic, about non-normative gender and its trajectories? Or might transgender and cisgender subjects simply be folded in different ways? Systematic thought is a fundamental tool which human beings use to conceive of, understand, and relate to the world in which we live. Structures or frameworks are employed to impose order, and thereby to create a particular kind of sense or meaning. These systems also, however, impose rigid spatial logics upon the substrate to which they are applied, dictating the proper relations, distances and orientations that are to unite or divide individuals and their modes of existence. Such frameworks are, to a significant extent, interchangeable; in thought, we slip without concern from one to another, often without registering the difference — they are, after all, tools that we employ, rather than intrinsic facets of reality. The crucial differences between these frameworks are in their levels of flexibility, and their abilities to account for, rather than to reject, data and existences that do not immediately fit their structures. Calcified systems of thought lead to calcified worldviews, and thus to a lack of imagination and empathy which inhibits new ways of thinking and understanding. It is for precisely this reason that *mises en chantier* (reworkings) are so essential. Transgender and gender non-conforming lives both past and present, and the ways they are imagined and understood, are often difficult to account for by means of rigid or overly linear structures such as arborescent formations, or the sociocultural apparatus which regulates normative sex/gender/sexuality. This does not mean that such existences are inherently anti-structural, or fundamentally opposed to systematic modes of thought, but simply indicates that certain conceptual systems are inadequate to their comprehension. In order for a system of thought to be useful, it must be able to expand and adapt. Where this is not possible, individuals and societies must simply slip over into another, more malleable and imaginative framework, or else risk calcification and stagnation. Both rhizomes, with their ever-present lines of flight, and the Deleuzian fold, with its endless possibilities of new formations, reject a finalized state of being, and instead offer perspectives of perpetual and unlimited becoming.

Notes

1. Perret (1985) claims that homosexuality is never directly represented in the narrative literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; however, she writes, "les textes littéraires abordent volontiers cet aspect de la sexualité par le biais du travestissement : les textes où un homme se déguise en femme, ou bien une femme en homme ne sont pas rares, et permettent des situations ambiguës, où l'homosexualité, au second degré, est toujours suggérée" (literary texts willingly address this aspect of sexuality by means of transvestism: texts in which a man disguises himself as a woman, or else a woman disguises herself as a man, are not rare, and allow for ambiguous situations in which homosexuality is always obliquely suggested; 328, author's translation).

2. In no way do I mean to suggest that transgender readings are now somehow more important, more relevant or more valid than gay or lesbian readings. These readings can and should exist side-by-side, as well as working together to increase the complexity of theorization, presenting a spectrum of ways of engaging with medieval texts. We should strive to ensure, however, that more familiar queer readings do not dominate or invalidate the new readings emerging from the developing field of transgender studies. When transgender readings are attempted, they commonly function as an adjunct to a primary (usually gay and/or lesbian)

framework of interpretation. In order for transgender readings to display their full potential, it is necessary for a transgender optic to be used as the primary means of addressing a text, as I demonstrate in this article.

3. See also Gutt forthcoming.
4. The cycle comprises the following texts: *Doon de Mayence*; *Doon de Nanteuil*; *Aye d'Avignon*; *Gui de Nanteuil*; *Parise la Duchesse*; and *Tristan de Nanteuil*.
5. Sautman's 2001 discussion of gender roles, identities and the gendering of sexual desire is particularly perceptive, exploring the potential queerness of Clarinde's attraction to Blanchandine in her disguise as "Blanchandin."
6. McCracken's analysis also examines the shapes and shaping of family trees, and cites rhizomatic relationships as a challenge to linear genealogy.
7. The square brackets indicate my modifications of Conley's translation.
8. These texts are sometimes categorized instead as *chansons d'aventures*, on the basis of such elements.
9. All quotations from *Tristan de Nanteuil* refer to line numbers in K. V. Sinclair's edition (1971). Translations are my own.
10. Sautman interprets Blanchandine's bleeding as a marker of femininity which complicates the signification of the transformation; Blanchandine's female nature is thus "incorporated, but not obliterated, into the sex change" (2001, 210).
11. See *Yde et Olive*. 1889. In *Esclarmonde, Clarisse et Florent, Yde et Olive: Drei Fortsetzungen der Chanson von Huon de Bordeaux*, edited by Max Schweigel, 152–173. Marburg: N. G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
12. For a fascinating analysis of the way in which the penis figures as a marker not only of maleness, but of human identity in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, see McCracken 2017, 126–56 (see also McCracken 2014).
13. For valuable reflections on the lesbian potential of the union of Clarinde and Blanchandine, see Sautman 2001.

Notes on contributor

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