From Beasts to Souls
From Beasts to Souls

Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe

edited by

E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
Contents

List of Figures vii

Introduction: Gendered Bodies in Unexpected Places 1
E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken

I. INTIMATE CONNECTIONS

Chapter 1. The Sex Life of Stone 17
Jeffrey J. Cohen

Chapter 2. Nursing Animals and Cross-Species Intimacy 39
Peggy McCracken

Chapter 3. The Lady and the Dragon in Chrétien’s
Chevalier au lion 65
Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner

II. EMBODIED SOULS

Chapter 4. Rubber Soul: Theology, Hagiography, and the Spirit World of the High Middle Ages 89
Dyan Elliott

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
Chapter 5. Kissing the Worm: Sex and Gender in the Afterlife and the Poetic Posthuman in the Late Middle English “A Disputacion betwyx the Body and Wormes” 121
ELIZABETH ROBERTSON

III. INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS

Chapter 6. Hybridity, Ethics, and Gender in Two Old French Werewolf Tales 157
NOAH D. GUYN

Chapter 7. A Snake-Tailed Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the Roman de Mélusine 185
E. JANE BURNS

Chapter 8. Moving beyond Sexuality in Medieval Sexual Badges 221
ANN MARIE RASMUSSEN

Selected Bibliography 248
Contributors 264
Index 266
Figures

Figure 5.1. Transi-tomb. © British Library Board. British Library Add. 37049, fol. 32v. 131

Figure 5.2. Narrator kneeling before a bleeding Christ. © British Library Board. British Library Add. 37049, fol. 33r. 133

Figure 5.3. Corpse debating with worms above. © British Library Board. British Library Add. 37049, fol. 33v. 134

Figure 5.4. Corpse with worms below. © British Library Board. British Library Add. 37049, fol. 34v. 135

Figure 5.5. Corpse with lowered hand. © British Library Board. British Library Add. 37049, fol. 35r. 136

Figure 7.1. Mélusine in her bath. Detail, Arsenal Ms. 3353, fol. 130, Jean d’Arras, Le Roman de Mélusine, Bibliothèque nationale de France. 188

Figure 7.2. Mélusine flying toward Lusignan. Detail, Arsenal Ms. 3353, fol. 155v, Jean d’Arras, Le Roman de Mélusine, Bibliothèque nationale de France. 189

Figure 7.3. Siren holding a comb and mirror. Detail, Ms. 69, fol. 458, Bréviaire à l’usage de Besançon, © Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon. 194

Figure 7.4. Temptation of Adam and Eve. Detail, Douce Ms. 381, fol. 123, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. 197

© 2013 University of Notre Dame
Figure 7.5. Creation and Temptation. Detail, *Bible moralisée*, Codex 2554, fol. 2r, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. 198

Figure 7.6. Temptation. Detail, Latin Ms. 10434, fol. 10, *Psautier latin aux armes de France et de Castille*, Bibliothèque nationale de France. 199

Figure 7.7. Temptation. Detail, Cod. 9961-2, fol. 25, Peterborough Psalter, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique. 200

Figure 7.8. Temptation. Detail, MS K.26, fol. 4r, Cambridge Psalter, St. John's College, Cambridge. By permission of the Master and Fellows of St. John's College, Cambridge. 201

Figure 7.9. Temptation. Detail, 2 Inc.s.a. 1087, fol. 21, *Speculum humanae salvationis*, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München. 205


Figure 7.11. Detail, Ms. 2660, fol. 228, Armenian Patriarchate. 213

Figure 8.1. Vulva on stilts. Inventory number 2592. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 222

Figure 8.2. Crowned, belled, bewinged walking penis. Inventory number 1856. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 225

Figure 8.3. Couple copulating in brothel or inn. Inventory number 1842. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 229

Figure 8.4. Woman planting or digging up a phallus. Image courtesy of the Stedelijke Musea Ieper, Ypres, Belgium. 230
Figure 8.5. Three figures roasting a penis. Inventory number 2985. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 231

Figure 8.6. Winged penis in tree. Inventory number 2026. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 236

Figure 8.7. Winged vulva in tree. Inventory number 1850. Image courtesy of the Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands. 238

Figure 8.8. *Four Witches and Cat*, 1514. Drawing by Hans Baldung Grien, copied by Urs Graf. 243
In 1992, Marjorie Garber published a compelling analysis of J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, explaining why Peter Pan had (almost) always been played by a woman. Suggesting first that Peter was a cross-dressed version of Wendy, who in turn represented a version of Barrie himself, Garber went further to suggest that Peter was “suffering from a kind of species dysphoria, caught between being a bird and being a human child.” As the wise old bird Solomon Caw explains to Peter in Barrie’s 1902 stage play *The Little White Bird*, Peter is “a Betwixt-and-Between”:

> “Then I sha’n’t be exactly a human?” Peter asked.
> “No.”
> “Nor exactly a bird?”
> “No.”
> “What shall I be?”
> “You will be a Betwixt-and-Between,” Solomon said, and certainly he was a wise old fellow, for that is exactly how it turned out.  

For Garber, the character of Peter Pan offers a “split vision” of an adult woman who is also a little boy, a “third sex” enabling Barrie to break
open the Victorian dichotomies of man/woman, father/mother, man/boy. He does so, in this instance, specifically by displacing those predictable dyads onto a division of species: human/bird. For Peter Pan, then, gender crossings enacted by his human body are doubled by a facile movement between boys and birds: his human body can fly.

*Peter Pan* is not based on a medieval source, though in its representation of a species- and gender-crossing protagonist, it stages issues played out in a wide range of medieval cultural artifacts. Indeed, the Middle Ages provides a particularly rich trove of hybrid creatures, semi-human beings, and composite bodies. We need only think of the many differently bodied creatures that adorn manuscript pages or decorate stone capitals and carvings on Romanesque churches: human heads with tails but no body, leaf masks and faces without obvious gender, disembodied breasts, an ungendered face exposing female genitalia, a man’s face with a swan neck, bird wings, lion feet, and a snake tail, or sirens with a woman’s head and a bird’s body. Showcasing the fullest possible spectrum of imagined species crossings, these figures incorporate both human and animal elements within a decorative vegetal matrix that allows facile movement between, and even confusion of, components from each realm. As human bodies are curved and twisted into stemlike shapes, animal tails often end in plantlike tendrils. The newly discovered ceiling at Metz shows that fish bodies can be combined with almost any animal torso. On Romanesque capitals generally, humans appear with the head of a dog or an ass, but more frequently animals are shown bearing human heads or exhibiting the human behavior of musicians, acrobats, dancers, or jugglers. And yet, however fanciful and elaborate these cross-species hybrids become, binary gender assignments seem to remain unchallenged. Gender is clearly marked, for example, by the bearded faces of centaurs and other men with animal or fish bodies, and by the pronounced breasts and long hair of mermaids. Different from the example provided by Peter Pan, the species crossings in these medieval images seem to occur without any apparent effect on the gender of the changed bodies that result.

A number of medieval literary texts stage a similar process, describing seemingly effortless cross-species transformations of people into wolves and wolves into people or the existence of women-serpents or
birdmen with no significant disruption of embodied gender. In the French tradition, for example, we never question the gender of the bird-lover in Marie de France’s Yonec or that of the werewolf in Bisclavret. Even medieval accounts of fairies tend to focus on bodily change while leaving gender intact. All fairies are not shape-shifters, and all characters that demonstrate the ability to change form are not called fairies, but the fairy figure drawn from folklore is the most prominent form for the representation of nondivine and nondemonic supernatural beings in medieval texts, as Laurence Harf-Lancner has argued. Often, however, the human body of the shape-shifting protagonist is firmly grounded in the most exemplary forms of courtly gender—the expression “as beautiful as a fairy” (belle comme une fée) underwrites the conventional norm of appreciation for female courtly beauty. Male fairies are perhaps less common but no less securely gendered. Auberon, king of the fairies, is a dwarf who has lived for more than one hundred years, and even if he does not have the physique of a great knight, he is securely grounded in attributes of his gender, as defined in medieval narratives: he is a paragon of masculine beauty and he leads a great army.

Monsters offer another example of beings that expand or distort the limits of the body. The figure of Mélusine may be exemplary of the disputed boundary between the two—is she a fairy or is she a monster?—and as in the case of Mélusine, debates about monsters seem often to focus on the implications of embodiment for gender. Monstrous medieval bodies, whether monstrous female reproductive bodies or impotent male bodies, can also serve as a repository for specific cultural fears about human sexuality and embodied identity. Might it be possible and productive, however, to rethink the larger gendered implications of hybrid or transformative medieval bodies beyond their reflection of or relation to the human?

The current volume seeks to raise the issues of species and gender in tandem, asking readers to consider more fully what happens to gender in medieval representations of nonhuman embodiment. We ask when and how the nonhuman or species-changing body might in fact become differently gendered or degendered, and to what extent it might occupy a new position in a spectrum of gendered possibilities. Under what circumstances do medieval literary texts, historical accounts, and
visual images connect species identity with gender identity? And what are the gendered values assigned in medieval works to nonhuman or cross-species embodiment?

To be sure, medieval literature offers many examples of gender mutability, but not usually within stories about shape-shifting protagonists or cross-species transformation. Narratives of cross-dressing and representations of androgynous identity populate texts ranging from saints’ lives and Arthurian romance to Christine de Pisan’s Mutacion de fortune. Cross-dressing is associated even with the canonical figures of Lancelot and Guenevere, and particularly striking examples are provided by the Roman de Silence, Tristan de Nanteuil, or Floris et Lyriope, where gender ambiguity or disguise may suggest queer sexuality. While the gender crossings represented in narratives about cross-dressing protagonists are often temporary, cast as the product of practical disguise or facilitated by borrowed clothing, they raise nonetheless the issue of the arbitrariness of gender categories by blatantly transgressing them. Often at stake in these scenarios of gender-bending are cultural patterns and power dynamics rather than physical alterations of embodied beings. Yet they attest to a fascination with the fragility of the boundary between categories of masculine and feminine and an interest in exploring ways to breach, displace, question, or reconfigure it.

Medieval sexuality studies has long been a crucial area of inquiry into gender and embodiment, and scholars have described the various ways in which desire not only escapes the different-sex alignments prescribed and policed by social and religious institutions but reconceives bodies in terms of desire. In some romance narratives, for example, desirable bodies are represented less in terms of gendered characteristics than in terms of their exemplary courtly attributes. Heterosexual hegemony is revealed as contested and fragile, and even as same-sex desire is roundly condemned in some religious, legal, and literary discourses, it is represented without censure and even sanctioned in others. The human/nonhuman divide may be a site in which differently embodied forms of being suggest differently imagined forms of desire, and gender is an important category of analysis for thinking about both bodies and sexuality. To what extent might explorations of medieval sexuality and gender dynamics change if they addressed non-
human bodies along with the human, or if they addressed the joining of human and nonhuman or not entirely human bodies?

Our claim is—from the perspective of medieval studies, but with a theoretical urgency that addresses the fields of posthumanist and feminist studies in general—that inquiries into nonhuman and differently embodied being call out strongly for a new and careful assessment of gender.

We might consider at this point the character of Tinkerbell, who, even more than Peter Pan, carries us beyond the physical body and beyond the human. In Barrie’s play *Peter and Wendy*, where the roles of both Peter Pan and the Lost Boys were typically played by actresses, the character of Tinkerbell was not enacted by an embodied human at all but represented only by a “flame of light not much larger than a human finger [that] flashes about the room.”18 If Barrie’s own definition of Tinkerbell places her “Betwixt-and-Between” genders—at once a fairy and a “tinker,” that is, a tinsmith like the actual historical male tinkers who mended pots and kettles—the stage production further locates her between animate and inanimate worlds. Her seemingly human but incomprehensible “dialogue” is conveyed only by the sounds of tinkling bells, as intangible as the darting light that alone makes her “visible.” To be sure, Barrie does not cultivate this potential cross-gender/species/inanimate ambiguity to its fullest. By referring to Tinkerbell as a “she” who engages in a jealous battle with Wendy for Peter’s affections, Barrie undercuts the full force of a disembodied character who can fly and also communicate through nonhuman sounds. Thus does Barrie himself, in a sense, pave the way for Disney’s later uncompromising reduction of Tinkerbell to the category of the feminine, a creature, however supernatural, bearing an incontrovertibly female body.

And yet one wonders about the theoretical potential of that darting light representing a character who behaves like an engaged and active subject without possessing a human or animal form. While Peter flies like a human on fairy dust, Tinkerbell flits around the room, moving in and out of drawers because she has no “body” of a fixed or determined size. And yet she is not disembodied, invisible, or wholly intangible. Tinkerbell is embodied in light and sound, both inanimate forces that can move but cannot be contained, outlined, or restrained. Their
essence is to be changeable. In Barrie’s play, this “woman’s” gender results from a pronoun alone. In a number of interesting ways, then, Tinkerbell raises the possibility of exploring what happens to gender when we move beyond the physical body and, even further, beyond the human.

The contributors to this volume take up that challenge, showing that medieval cultural artifacts, whether literary, historical, or visual, do not limit questions of gender to predictable forms of human or semi-human embodiment. They also reflect on the gender of stones and of the soul, of worms and dragons. By expanding what counts as “the body” in medieval cultural studies, the essays to follow expand our understanding of gendered embodiment—articulating new perspectives on its range, functions, and effects.

Whereas feminist critics have long interrogated the many and varied gender formations that are both constructed through and sometimes obscured by conventional forms of human embodiment in medieval texts, those studies typically limit their understanding of “the body” to the human body. Following the lead of feminist theorists from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, feminist scholars of the Middle Ages have sought to understand the varied roles that human bodies played in constructing gendered subjectivity. Whether analyzing religious or secular bodies, historical women, literary characters, or visual representations of female bodies, feminist medievalists have tended to focus their efforts on understanding relational dynamics of women’s bodies in the social sphere, explaining the relations between female bodies and the cultural formations that created, surveyed, controlled, or fostered them. Apart from recent studies on monsters and, to some extent, on fairies, less emphasis has been placed on understanding the gendered implications of nonhuman bodies.

More recently, medievalists have begun to explore relationships between human and nonhuman embodiment and to question what representations of nonhuman bodies may offer to our understanding of the human. Joyce Salisbury’s *The Beast Within* was a pathbreaking contribution to medieval animal studies, revealing, along with other studies, the extent to which inquiries into human-animal relations pervade medieval textual traditions from fables to allegory and from didactic and moral treatises to scholastic, encyclopedic, and legal works. Other inquiries
have focused on the practical relationships between humans and animals as scripted in hunting, the merging of man and horse in the figure of the knight, and the humanlike qualities of animals. Medievalists have examined both the symbolic uses of animals in bestiaries and the material use of animals in medieval textuality, and they have identified the human subjugation of animals as an essential grounding for the medieval concept of the human. Drawing on theoretical work from posthumanism, medievalists have demonstrated the extent to which medieval authors use nonhuman embodiment to think about the human, about sovereignty, and about social and political relations. Although much of this scholarship is informed by or sympathetic to feminist theory and criticism, there has not yet been any sustained attention to the ways medieval explorations of the boundaries of the human might redefine or challenge our contemporary concepts of gender.

This is one potentially rich and important contribution that posthumanism can make to feminism: spurring us to move beyond the feminist challenge of thinking through the all-too-human body and to imagine bodies that include the animal, vegetal, and even inanimate aspects of embodiment, all the while keeping gender at the forefront of our analysis. The goal of From Beasts to Souls is to ask how medieval cultural representations of nonhuman or partially human creatures, whether literary, visual, religious, or theological, give us new ways to think about gender and embodiment on a broader theoretical spectrum. The contributors to this volume explore that question in a range of medieval contexts extending from learned debates to everyday objects of popular culture. Their essays ask: To what extent can we draw on depictions of differently bodied creatures in the Middle Ages to dislodge and reconfigure the long-standing constraints imposed by an understanding of the body as always human and of the human body as merely male and female?

While the essays collected here take medieval Europe as a point of departure, their analyses of gender and embodiment carry us across a number of cultural contexts and academic disciplines: moving from French and English literature to objects of Germanic and Netherlandish material culture, from theological debates to literary concerns with the soul. They engage with issues of gender and embodiment located in
stones, skeletons, and snake tails, swan-knights, werewolves, and wandering genitalia, along with a host of other unexpected places. They ask us to consider the gendered embodiment of the dead, the amorous attraction between humans and minerals, the political implications of magical bodies, and the social function of bodies reduced to gendered parts. Although these topics and others addressed in this volume derive from medieval literary, theological, and cultural artifacts from northern Europe, they have potential implications for a broader cultural and geographic expanse. These essays are not intended to represent every area of medieval Europe; rather, they offer models for thinking about gendered embodiment that might provoke work in other areas, intersecting productively, we would hope, with studies of race and contact among Jews, Muslims, and Christians, particularly in Iberia, as well as work from Mediterranean studies that identifies the connections and exchanges among Europe, the East, and Africa.

We have grouped the essays into sections that reflect specific ways they address gendered embodiment beyond the human in the Middle Ages: Part I, “Intimate Connections”; Part II, “Embodied Souls”; and Part III, “Institutional Effects.” The first group of essays engages with some of the more private and personal functions of medieval bodies: desire, intimacy, and love. The second group examines the theological implications of embodiment, specifically the bodies of souls. The third group of essays addresses more public functions of gendered bodies as they relate to social institutions of feudal loyalty and marriage, inheritance, and gendered labor. To be sure, the distinction between public and private functions of embodiment is porous. Cultural and feminist historians from Peter Brown to Caroline Bynum have shown that throughout the Middle Ages the human body was understood to occupy a tenuous position between two key spheres of existence, being at one and the same time intimately personal, private, and individualized while also performing in highly visible, public, and communal capacities. The essays that follow showcase a range of differently bodied, nonhuman, or species-changing creatures that participate in both public and private spheres, challenging as they do so our conceptions of human/animal embodiment and gendered social space.
Essays in the first section, “Intimate Connections,” allow us to see the extent to which already in the early Middle Ages we find configurations of desire beyond the biological, intimacy beyond the purely human, and love and friendship beyond what courtliness would normally allow. Jeffrey J. Cohen’s “The Sex Life of Stone” provocatively opens up the categories of the human, animal, vegetable, and mineral to reveal medieval configurations of desire untethered to the biological. Moving beyond animal studies to the consideration of “inorganic others,” such as rocks, Cohen’s analysis shows what an embodied post-human stone might do. Drawing on classical and medieval stone lore along with John Mandeville’s account of diamonds, Cohen discusses medieval views of stones as erotic, gendered, and lively creatures.

Peggy McCracken’s essay “Nursing Animals and Cross-Species Intimacy” identifies patterns of intimacy that extend beyond the purely human in a comparative study of representations of cross-species nursing. McCracken examines medieval swan-knights in the Old French Crusade Cycle, a human mother’s relationship with suckling fawns in Decameron 2.6, a maternal deer in Ibn Tufayl’s Andalusian tale Hayy ibn Yaqzan, and a scene in which adulterous women nurse puppies, and argues that intimate configurations of maternity and animality persist in noble genealogies.

In chapter 3, “The Lady and the Dragon in Chrétien’s Chevalier au lion,” Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner suggests that reading through gendered animals can provide a new perspective on heterosexual love in the Middle Ages. To fully understand the relation between Yvain and the lady Laudine in this romance, we are encouraged to shift our focus from the lion to the lady and to the clear outlines of a dragon lurking behind her. In this tale, which so insistently calls our attention to beasts, the anomaly of a female-gendered dragon in the role of the knight’s lady significantly alters the expected paradigm of courtly love.

The essays in the second section, “Embodied Souls,” broaden our understanding of the relation between souls and bodies in the Middle Ages by considering the physically recognizable bodies of dead people and by expanding the soul-body debate with the addition of an unexpected third term: worms. In “Rubber Soul: Theology, Hagiography, and the Spirit World of the High Middle Ages,” Dyan Elliott asks
whether the soul can have a body of its own and, if so, whether this body is gendered. Examining Beguine hagiography, she shows that a postmortem identity has important consequences for gender. Although the soul, once separated from the body, is supposed to be devoid of sex, Beguine hagiography describes an embodied and sexed afterlife in which the body gradually drains into the soul.

Turning to a literary representation of a female soul in “Kissing the Worm: Sex and Gender in the Afterlife and the Poetic Posthuman in the Late Middle English ‘A Disputacion betwyx the Body and Wormes,’” Elizabeth Robertson argues that the poem represents nonhuman but still gendered entities—a corpse, a soul that allows the corpse to speak, and a speaking worm. Their debate about embodiment and decay stages the dilemma of a female soul/corpse attempting to escape her bodily desires at the same time that she displays them in her active embrace of the sexualized worms.

Section 3, “Institutional Effects,” includes essays that demonstrate ways in which nonconforming bodies can challenge institutionalized categories of power. In chapter 6, “Hybridity, Ethics, and Gender in Two Old French Werewolf Tales,” Noah Guynn argues that Marie de France’s Bisclavret and the anonymous lay Melion call into question medieval institutions of feudal loyalty among men and female subservience in marriage by exploiting ambiguities of characterization and narration. Depictions of gender difference and incongruous, compound forms of being are used in these texts to challenge the moral and social institutions that underwrite gender asymmetry and misogyny.

Chapter 7 shows how a shape-shifting, hybrid female body is used in the fourteenth-century Roman de Mélusine to advance the fictive political ancestry of the duc de Berry as a putative descendant of the Lusignan family line. In “A Snake-Tailed Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the Roman de Mélusine,” E. Jane Burns reads the half-snake, half-dragon courtly woman Mélusine against established clerical views of her as the Eden serpent, arguing instead that the romance rewrites the Eden myth for an expansionist political purpose.

To close, Ann Marie Rasmussen carries us beyond questions of feudal loyalty and dynastic lineage to focus on visual expressions of female symbolic power associated with domains of women’s work. Her
analysis of the mobile vulvas and wandering penises depicted on medieval sexual badges in chapter 8, “Moving beyond Sexuality in Medieval Sexual Badges,” argues that these highly sexed images of hybrid creatures have little to do with heterosexual or homosexual desire. She reads them instead as advancing a kind of female masculinity based in spheres of social and economic life managed and dominated by women.

Taken together, these varied explorations of gender and embodiment attest to a diverse range of differently bodied and differently gendered beings in medieval culture. These early textual and visual materials demonstrate that once we attempt to think beyond the limitations of the human body, many new possibilities for understanding gender emerge. In fact, these medieval models suggest that it is by moving beyond the human and beyond predictable configurations of human bodies that we can begin to imagine new configurations of gender, whether in the form of gendered bodies, desires, and intimate practices, as gendered souls, or in terms of gendered spaces, institutions, and the social behaviors within them.

NOTES

3. Garber, Vested Interests, 175.