
Original Article

Trans textuality: Dysphoria in the depths of medieval skin

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Abstract This article proposes a theoretical method of approaching manuscripts, such as the Ellesmere manuscript of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, through transgender theory, called trans textuality. Beyond looking for transgender identities in medieval texts, such a method asks, 'what is a trans way of reading?' and 'how might non-human objects function in trans ways?' The study is informed by foundational texts in trans psychoanalysis concerning the processes that trans skin undergoes during transition, texts which are put in conversation with medieval manuscript studies and new materialisms. The resulting response focuses on the threefold work of trans textual skins: depth, duration, and dysphoria. Whether the object is the organ of a transgender body or a medieval manuscript, such trans texts are skin constructs which relate through materiality and metaphor the ongoing narrative of bodies in transition. The article concludes with a twofold study of Fragment VI of the Ellesmere manuscript where the images and writing of the Physician and Pardoner demonstrate the principles of trans textuality: the depth of meanings from other times and genders, the duration of a body through transitions in form, and a dysphoric soul striving in the deeps of medieval skin.

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A body is enduring transition. It undergoes a process that allows it to signify new genders, new social scripts, and be accepted by the world in new ways. First it must undergo the knife. The surface of the body will be cut up and folded into new organs. These new organs change how the body is read.



Indeed, by these operations of the skin, the body can become culturally intelligible. Yet after transition, society will insist that the work of enduring these changes be forgotten. For its new form to be accepted, the old must not get read. This means eschewing the scars in the depth of its history, the pain of enduring change, and the dysphoria that continues to disturb the surface. This is the story of a modern transsexual but also the story of a medieval manuscript.

Jay Prosser writes, '[t]ranssexuality entered the cultural lexicon as a form of extreme (body) transvestism, with the body's skin as the "clothing" that the subject needed changing' (Prosser, 1998, 68). In a trans textual frame, taking skin from the arm to form a trans man's penis is not ontologically different than taking skin from a sheep to make a book. Both trans bodies and manuscripts can be reduced to the language written on the surface, as though they do not have stories that are readable in the depths of the skin. The prefix which transgender has claimed as its own, 'trans,' suggests that we attend to trans bodies between the inside and the other and to the fluidity of what moves from one side to another, be it verso to recto, man to woman, or somewhere in between. Post-transition trans experience evidences that changing or affirming a gender never occurs without the past, the other side of the turned page, leaking through surfaces.

This article proposes 'trans textuality' as a method of thinking about transitioned skin, arguing that dysphoric materiality informs a trans textual approach that looks to the meeting of past and present, verso and recto, foreground and background as enduring tensions in the depths of our history. Dwelling on this, I put the trans psychoanalysis of Prosser's *Second Skins: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) and Gayle Salamon's *Assuming A Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010) into dialogue with medieval manuscript studies, the vitalist materialism of Henri Bergson ([1907] 1998), and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), to establish how trans lives express a literal and metaphoric depth that resists the reduction of gender to a mere play of signifiers on the surface of the skin, and to ask: what might trans textuality look like and what could trans textuality offer?

As a case study, I turn to the recto sides of Fragment VI of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to show how the text both promotes fixed surfaces and speaks of a medieval past that is always under reconstruction and always emerging into the present.¹ Turning the pages of the Ellesmere manuscript (Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9, c.1400; Schulz, 1998), painted images on the vellum do not remain static figures on the back surface of the leaf, but bleed through the porous skin to the verso side. The image of the Physician (fol.113v, 55–66) and Pardoner (fol.193v, 512–58) transverse into text in their respective narratives on limiting the flow of fluids through the body, suggesting that however sealed flesh may be, skin always leaks. Reading the images alongside the writing they overlap on the verso side, concerned chiefly with two figures of

1 All citations of *The Canterbury Tales* refer to Benson (1988).



sealed and porous bodies, the virgin and the drunk, the skin speaks in new ways. Such manuscripts that remind us of the text's skin-ness, its porous depths, disturb the primacy of surface language the way non-passing trans bodies disturb the peace of gender problems we thought we fixed or sexism we thought we had cut out.

Theories of transition: Dysphoria, duration, and depth

'As the insider joke goes, transition is what transsexuals do,' writes Prosser (1998, 4). In trans studies, transition does not merely mark a point between points, nor is it a chaotic flow without direction. Transition suggests a trajectory, forward motion, or *telos*. Yet as trans narratives express, the embodied practice of transition never ends. There are slippages backward toward old forms of life. Stubborn material traces endure. In her study of Eleanor Rykener, Carolyn Dinshaw calls such trans-temporal correspondence 'queer vibrations' (Dinshaw, 1999, 104). Elizabeth Freeman calls such knots of endurance the binding, wounding, or suspension of time (Freeman, 2010, 1–7). In this way, 'trans time' may function like 'queer time,' in nonlinear flows. Trans lives often experience glimpses of what is to come. Phantom body parts anticipate breasts to be formed. In trans culture, the embodied experience of transitional slippage is often called dysphoria. Dysphoria is the material – all too material – experience of enduring change. Yet do not other things endure similar transversals? Such speculation raises further queries: May other bodies experience dysphoria? How might other flesh 'do' transition?

Understanding 'trans' as a verb, a doing beyond just a state of being, allows us to articulate 'trans textuality' as a function of texts which Sarah Kay describes as 'a space of ambiguity' (Kay, 2017, 3). To explore such a material trans space, such as in the Ellesmere manuscript, three principles of transitioning skin will be examined: (1) the marks of transition on the surface of skin (ink, scars, text) draw readers away from the present toward an unsettled fluidity of time, wherein the past and present, future and present, exist in open discourse, what Bergson calls '*depth*'; (2) skin endures transition through forms of embodiment (eras of time, sex, or gender), forming a continuity of undifferentiated *duration* on which differences are established; and (3) skin experiences *dysphoria* by enacting slippages between surfaces (past and future, man and woman, animal and object) disturbing the depths of skin with the shades and foreshadowing of duration (Figure 1).

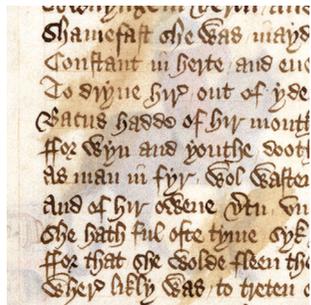


Figure 1: Detail of the Physician in MS EL 26 C 9 (c.1400), fol. 133v, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Depths

Readers can start to imagine trans textuality by attending to the eruption of depth out of what seem to be flat surfaces of the skin. Consider the example of Raymond Thompson's autobiography, when the trans author tells the story of checking the mirror one day to find their face covered in blisters. Studying the scene, Prosser describes this as a materialization of the body's dysphoria, of the inside trying to get outside: 'vesicles filled bodily fluids bursting up and out from their internal course through to the body's surface, overflowing their assigned passage' (Prosser, 1998, 71). Other causes of the blisters aside, Prosser's analysis points to how disturbances on the surface can draw our senses to the existence and activities of inner depths. Likewise, Bergson challenges our tendency to read only 'images' on 'the outer skin,' insisting we gain more enduring knowledge, 'perceived in its depths and no longer only on the surface' (Bergson [1896] 1990, 64). These blisters are not just discourses written on the surface of the skin but are like news carried across the depths from elsewhere or elsewhen.

By reading signs on the surface of the Ellesmere manuscript we can use our imagination to see and touch the inside of the skin. Kay argues that an imaginative dive into the depths of medieval skin allows readers not just to study but also to identify with manuscripts, citing how texts 'conjure in their readers the sense of having an inner life experienced as "inner vision" and as "inner touch" and formed by the internalized sight and touch of another skin' (Kay, 2017, 131). Her aim is to demonstrate how such pages invite readers to identify with the animals whose bodies have gone into the making of the text, to feel points of contact and similarity, then to imagine how it might feel to be that manuscript. In her formulation, inner touch is a double motion of the reader reaching inside the manuscript and the manuscript acting on the internal affects of the reader. With such an empathetic link established, any number of things might be carried across.

Literally meaning 'to carry across', from 'meta' [over, across] and 'pherein' [to carry], metaphor is key to touching the trans-ness of various bodies, insofar as it

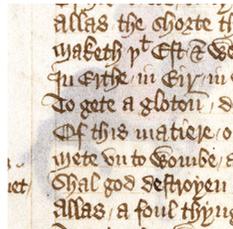


Figure 2: Detail of the Pardoner in MS EL 26 C 9 (c.1400), fol. 138v, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

represents a life being carried across time and genres of embodiment (*OED*, 2017, sv ‘metaphor’). A text is metaphoric as it carries meaning from page to page, or, as Bruce Holsinger observes, in the way texts remind readers of enduring truths, as ‘medieval literature survives to us primarily on and as animal’ (Holsinger, 2009, 619). Engaging the text as metaphoric in this way is to resist abstraction that cuts off objects from the past, looking into the depths of pages to reckon with the dysphoric inner touch of animal and book, skin and page, past and present. The violence against sheep, which is part of the making of the Ellesmere manuscript, is not the same as the cutting and reconstructing of transsexual flesh, but what emerges from reading both skins for trans textuality is an affirmation that within all surfaces lie depths of ongoing transition (Figure 2).

Duration

‘Duration’ is defined by Henri Bergson as ‘the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances’ (Bergson, [1907] 1998, 4). Too often we imagine the past as a thing that has happened and is no longer happening. The distinction between medieval and modern eras suggests just such a supersession model of time. Yet Bergson argues that, as far as subjectivity and materiality are concerned, surfaces may change yet something of the past always endures: ‘[i]ts past [...] is prolonged into its present, and abides there, actual and acting’ (Bergson, [1907] 1998, 15). Change becomes legible by way of the thing that changes still being the thing (in a changed form) before and after the transition. That characteristics of an image should change when one turns the page is not contrary to duration. Rather, change is one way that endurance functions. Through the force of transitions and metaphors the materiality of different surfaces exists within the duration of one body.

Observing that the transition of the animal’s skin does not end with death or fabrication into a text such as the Ellesmere manuscript, Kay notes, ‘[t]he more parchment is handled, the more oil or grime is transferred to it from the skin of its users and the more skin-like it appears (Kay, 2017, 3). The oils deep in the



page speak to this duration as an object with material histories of an animal, absorbing and holding onto human traces. Kay concludes that ‘resemblance to human skin is obvious to anyone who has looked at medieval manuscripts,’ yet, in effect, the more manuscripts and readers touch, the more they become like one another in their depths (Kay, 2017, 3). Thus, the duration of the manuscript becomes a space of ambiguity in which matter and meanings touch. By such physical metaphors, the page creates avenues of touch (and inner touch) by which trans textuality may be experienced and/or imagined.

Duration names that living ongoing medium from which surfaces are made and through which surfaces transmit. ‘The making of new transsexual parts (vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, mastectomy) consists in the surgical manipulation of the body’s surface,’ writes Prosser, ‘the grafting, splitting, stretching, inverting, splitting, tucking, suturing of the tissues’ (Prosser, 1998, 66). The creation of these new organs from skin changes the dominant signifiers of the body like the adoption of new tropes in a narrative, recoding the person’s genre of embodiment. Yet in this work, hormones and surgery affect the transsexual skin in a way that makes it appear all surface, covering over the change that the body endures, ‘altering tissue structure (muscle, fat, breast, genital), redistributing hair, changing skin texture’ (Prosser, 1998, 66). Trans duration reveals itself not to be the effect of disturbing surfaces; rather, surfaces are the product of duration’s division. The body endures the making and remaking of its surface while not being reduced to any single form.

Dysphoria

The third principle of transition understood in a trans textual mode is dysphoria. With some poetic license and philosophical nuance, dysphoria may be understood as an inability to cut out the trans soul either by the sharp tools of surgery or gender norms. A trans soul lives in the skin and goes deeper with each touch of the knife. Kay writes of the striving that is alive in skin, ‘the mind, spirit, or soul; the “inner life” (anima) that the skin is thought of as containing’ (Kay, 2017, 218). The idea of the body containing a soul is not new to medieval thinkers or medievalists. Yet Kay’s analysis pushes further. What if the skin contains the soul not as glass contains fluid but as the life that transverses, moves, and animates it? Trans theory has likewise felt skin is not a mere vessel for psyche but a part of sensing and cognizing: dysphoria dwells in positive depths not in a negative space between surfaces. Salamon explores psychoanalytic theory that suggests that the psyche, the animating force of life, can be understood as ‘the structure and function of the skin’ (Salamon, 2010, 26). For

2 See Chen (2012) for a non-psychoanalytic understanding of anima.

her and others, skin is not separate or secondary but the grounds from which an animus emerges.²

As grounds for the emergence and animation, Kay argues that skin engages with those who encounter it, ‘provide[s] their readers with a skin within which they “see” what the book expounds and “feel” the touch that it describes’ (Kay, 2017, 131). Skin, such as that which makes up the Ellesmere manuscript, affects readers so that they become moved by and join with its animus. Likewise, Salamon opens the possibility that the skin animus of trans persons spurs us to see and feel in trans ways and wonders: ‘the consequences for embodiment and subjectivity when the relation between the self and skin is not one of ease and euphoria but discomfort and dysphoria’ (Salamon, 2010, 27). Encountering the dysphoria animating the Ellesmere manuscript draws readers to see themselves through a trans textuality, a break down in binaries that may be disturbing to readers who (due to the conditioning of gender) are not used to such experiences.

Kay cites Jacques Derrida to describe how texts such as the Ellesmere manuscript can instill a sense of other embodiments: ‘Derrida coined the term “invagination” to evoke the way texts, like the skin around our bodies, are home to a process of continual exchange between insides and coterminous outsides, and meanings are folded into one another’ with the result ‘that both terms are destabilized’ (2017, 68, 86). While readers maintain distinct forms of inner touch, conditioned by the norms of gender and sexuality, manuscripts can cause readers to endure the feeling of anxiety or dysphoria, brought on by the bleeding together of diverse times, species, and genres of embodiment. ‘A sense of their own skin as penetrable (or not) will be experienced differently by different readers stemming at least partly from their own gender and sexuality,’ writes Kay (2017, 67). Each imagination is influenced by metaphors, endured touch, and ways of seeing distinct to each person. Queer women and straight women may experience penetration differently, as might cis men and trans men. Encounters with such invagination, such as those present in the Ellesmere manuscript, may be disorienting or difficult for some, when other lives from the past or those which might come-to-be brush up against the surface of one’s lived genre of embodiment.

‘Transsexual subjects frequently articulate their bodily alienation as discomfort with their skin,’ writes Prosser; ‘being trapped in the wrong body is figured as being in the wrong, or an extra, or a second skin, and transsexuality is expressed as a desire to shed or step out of this skin’ (Prosser, 1998, 68). *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (2013, 1–8) defines gender dysphoria as ‘a marked incongruence between the gender they have been assigned to [...] and their experienced/expressed gender.’ The next eight criteria involve some ‘strong desire’ or ‘strong rejection’ (*DSM-V*, 2013, 1–8). The aversion may include aspects of one’s body or history. This distinguishes dysphoric bodies from other multiplicities by directionality. As will



be shown in Fragment VI of *The Canterbury Tales*, the depths, durations, and dysphoria in the skin often thwart the striving of bodies in one certain direction.

The images of Fragment VI: Visual metaphors of transition

Turning to the surfaces through which the images of the Physician and Pardoner travel, fol. 113v and fol. 193v respectively, the two tales of Fragment VI invite readers into the trans textual movements within the manuscript skin. In particular, by reading the visual portraits painted on the page from both their front and their back sides, the rhetoric of the images changes. The Physician's image may seem to embody the clean and controlled surfaces for which he works, yet looking at the image again after the page is turned reveals a fluidity that endures and becomes visible on the other side as a porous ecology of skin and ink. Conversely, the Pardoner's image seems to predict the fragmentation and transversal movements of its dye on the skin, constructed as a figure with repeating shapes, faces, and directions that anticipate the breakdown of binaries on its far surface (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Detail of the Physician in MS EL 26 C 9 (c.1400), fol. 133r, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The Physician's image

The image of the Physician that bleeds through the skin of the manuscript embodies a failed attempt to contain fluidity and reduce depth to surface (fol. 113v). The image of the Physician appears beside the text and a few things about the illustration suggest the containment of the body. One of the most prominent features of the image is that the Physician holds a glass bottle filled with yellow fluid. Despite riding on a horse, the Physician devotes both hands to presenting the substance-filled container. The eyes of the Physician look in the general direction of the bottle (left). While skin leaks and drinks substances through its porous rind, such a glass vessel contains the fluidity of a substance while itself exhibiting no blemish or secret.

Unlike the glass and more like the skin on which the manuscript is written, the horse turns away from the viewer as if calling readers to look away from the abstractions of the image to the materiality of the manuscript. On the reverse face, the other side of the image appears, thick with textuality, mediated through the depths of the manuscript skin. There is no room for abstraction without enduring textuality here. There is no direct knowledge to be gazed at through fixed and transparent vessels but rather the ongoing duration of trans knowledge where meaning and matter intertwine, not always in agreement, in flesh that breaks, bleeds, and blends the binary of front and back.

For those touching or looking at the text, the enduring image can open one to the dysphoria of invagination. In 'The Law of Genre,' Derrida writes of invagination as an act, 'forming a pocket inside the corpus' of the text (Derrida, 1980, 70). This might also apply to the corpus of the Physician and reader. Moving from a surface to deep reading, the image emerges with little pores into which the dye has found residence. The image from this vantage looks like irregular dots that strive toward the shape of man and horse rather than naturally occupy them. Contrary to the Physician's value of constancy in one's outward performance and in one's 'herte' (VI.55–7), the invagination of the skin creates a sense of dysphoria in the text. Even men are penetrated by the outside and impregnated with the anima of substances. Perhaps readers understand the Physician's striving for mastery of sealed flesh because of a kind of trans dysphoria, 'bodily alienation as discomfort with their skin' (Prosser, 1998, 68) (Figure 4).

The Pardoner's image

On the surface, the 'front' of Pardoner's image (fol. 193v) is much like the Physician's, although it suggests a multiplicity of embodiments and orientations. Considering the Pardoner, one of the first things to observe is that he has more than one face. The Pardoner proper looks down at a golden cross in his hands. A second face rests on top of the other, inscribed into the Pardoner's hat. This face



Figure 4: Detail of the Pardoner in MS EL 26 C 9 (c.1400), fol. 138r, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

looks out toward the reader with a virgin's shameful blushing expression. Even the Pardoner's horse looks head down, eyes leering ahead at the neighboring text or somewhere beyond.

Following the dominant human face on the image, the object that holds the Pardoner's gaze is more open and multifaceted than the Physician's. The doctor's glass has a round shape that suggests collectedness and continuity. The Pardoner's cross, on the other hand, breaks off first in four directions, roughly up, down, left, and right; although held at a slant, the object strives towards other slantwise or 'queer' orientations. 'Queer orientations,' writes Sara Ahmed, 'might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view' (Ahmed, 2006, 107). Indeed, following the gaze towards the end of the three short offshoots ends in an orb which is then subdivided again into crosses made up of four gold bars, surrounded by red, white, and blue dots – each a mini invagination, 'forming a pocket inside the corpus,' filled with dye. This fractures the orientation of the image further. Each part is a reflection of the whole, crosses within crosses, faces within faces. Like the relics he carries, the Pardoner's image suggests fragmentation beyond the binaries of inside and out, this way and that, male and female.

A figure haunted by the speculation on his non-binary/trans gender, that he is a 'geldyng or a mare' (691), the image of the Pardoner enduring through the page takes the suggestion of dysphoria and turns into an enactment of trans



3 For a discussion of the Pardoner as a trans figure, see Bychowski (2018).

textuality with the reader through the process of invagination.³ After ‘The Law of Genre,’ Derrida develops the term ‘invagination’ in *The Truth in Painting*, taking on the meaning which Sue Chaplin describes as ‘a text that folds in on itself, endlessly swapping outside for inside’ (Chaplin, 2004, 23). While the front of the image shines with clean surfaces and details, the colors that leak through tell a more enduring story. By moving from a surface event to an embodiment of duration, binaries break down. Front and back: the front interacts with the back via the middle. Subject and object: the cross that is so distinct on the surface is almost all subsumed by other figures. Brown and orange: different colors and shapes in the skin endure together.

As figures also with gendered significance in the image, the binary of man and animal falters as the image of the Pardoner and horse merge. Leaking through the skin the image seems more like discolored parts of a sheep’s skin than surface paintings. This is another way the Pardoner becomes-sheep or becomes-animal in general. Already the text has told readers that the Pardoner is much like a horse, a geldyng or a mare. This association is reiterated when he is pictured astride a horse – a partnership that blurs moving through the skin to make man and animal merge further. The Pardoner confesses that his relics derive from animal parts (VI.329–65). As with the crosses within crosses and faces within faces, existing together within a single duration does not mean that this multiplicity cannot exhibit multiple distinct orientations and surfaces.

The passages of Fragment VI: Textual metaphors of transition

While this study of trans textuality so far has concentrated on the visual features of Fragment VI, the writing which is inscribed over the back side of the images – as part of the *Physician’s Tale* (fol. 113v, 55–66) and *Pardoner’s Tale* (fol. 193v, 512–58) – is not fundamentally separate from the other marks; the ink that forms the writing is another element of the ecology of fluids running through the manuscript skin. Significantly, the passages that overlap with the back side of the images in both tales concern limiting the flow of substances through the orifices, with evident associations for the movement of dye through skin and the overflowing of binaries that regulate gendered life. As in the images, the Physician boasts a patriarchal vision of controlled flesh, whereas the Pardoner seems to relish the breakdown in distinctions between bodies.



The Physician's passage

The Physician's story on abstinence reflects and may even cause anxiety with its objects. In this case of the virgin body, the main object of his tale, skin becomes all surface by denying depth, as do women. 'Shamefast she was in maydens shamefastnesse,' instructs the Physician, 'Constant in herte, and evere in bisynesse to dryve hire out of ydel slogardye' (VI.55–7). A surgeon of hidden natures, shame is one of the doctor's tools by which depth is expunged, even as it depends on internality. An animus of shame functions as an inner touch, a suppression of inner secrets, to create the appearance of being a surface without sign of shame. A virgin must hold on to a lot of shame to avoid appearing shameful; it takes a lot of depth to appear perfectly shallow.

The concept of constancy is another tool used to create fixed surfaces that ends up revealing the hidden duration of a repressed animus. Constancy gives the impression that what is true for a time (virginity or cleanness) is true for all time. Yet to produce constant sexuality, a virgin must endure the performance of inconstancy, says the Physician, 'of hir owene vertu, unconstreyned, / she hath ful ofte tyme syk hire feyned, / for that she wolde fleen the compaignye / where likly was to treten of folye' (VI.61–4). Effective constancy is something that can be taken for granted, but illness must be endured, rising and falling from time to time so as to renew one's concern. The Physician notes that such an illness would come, 'ful ofte tyme' (VI.62), enduring sometime between a single moment and a constant strife. The illness becomes a kind of dancing animus, full of fits that require the striving movements and counter-movements.

Enduring the illness of shame is framed as an active choice, and choice requires the dysphoric shadows of alternative anima. While the Physician works to seal off the body, bragging, 'Bacus hadde of hir mouth right no maistrie,' even he admits that 'wyn and youthe dooth Venus encresse, / as men in fyr wol casten oille or gresse' (VI.58–60). The doctor's concerns over 'maistrie' reflect his anxiety over the virgin's porousness, her youthful proclivity towards 'Bacus' and 'Venus.' He fears that if fluids begin to flow within her, she will become invaginated, aware of other ways her skin is penetrated and porous. Pores evidence internal touch, anima, active desire, and shame. In short, the Physician wishes to seal her body not only to deflect what may touch her inners but also to contain the inner touch and striving already burning inside her, waiting for 'oille or gresse,' like ink going through a manuscript page, to increase it and make it known.

For all the concern over medical and moral health, the passage (fol. 113v, 55–66) reflects and creates a dysphoric discomfort with the virgin's materiality that invaginates her and readers with the possibilities of other gendered modes of being. For virginal, seemingly non-porous non-penetrated bodies, on the other side of the skin from the patriarchy are the touch of Bacchus and Venus, representing alternate modes of gender. Venus may incite change by

menstruation, arousal, or pregnancy. Bacchus may incite drunkenness and illness. The competition can incite a kind of dysphoria, where the gender identified or expressed conflicts with the form society assigns. Society would have virgins be constant, shallow surfaces ruled by a father, husband, or patriarch like the Physician. Yet the passage's anxieties may evidence and incite dysphoria in virgins and readers who nonetheless experience strivings for inner touch, another way of embodying gender, and the shame or desire at the invagination of Venus and Bacchus.

The Pardoner's passage

While the Physician is optimistic that the body can be flattened into pure surface, the Pardoner's passage (fol. 193v, 512–58) admits that all flesh is bound to be dysphoric. Rather than begin with virginity as an ideal of constancy, the Pardoner begins with the assumption that flesh tends towards dysphoria and drunkenness: 'O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod, / Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun! / At either ende of thee foul is the soun' (VI.534–6). Far from considering the body constant and quiet like a virgin, the Pardoner considers the entropy and noise that runs through its middles. The surface of skin is not a smooth uninterrupted surface but full of holes, breakdowns, and bleed-throughs. The skin allows fluids to pass from one side to the other, announcing itself loudly as it enters and exits, revealing the ever-transitioning ecology within its depths.

The Pardoner is aware that skin is full of orifices that allow for fluid movement. In describing the gluttonous, he says, 'Out of the harde bones knocke they, / the mary, for they caste noght away, / that may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote' (VI.541–3). The gluttonous may be extreme cases of throwing oneself into materiality, but such a dive knows well the middle of things. In the depths of the body, inside the bones, is marrow, an animus that sustains one body and if consumed sustains another – transitioning matter from one invaginated middle to another, one depth to another. The ecology of eating generates a sense of the body not as a constant surface but as a series of middles, an enduring animus that transitions between genres of embodiment. The skin then is not so much a surface but a median where depths of different sorts meet, touch, and merge.

While appreciating hidden depths, the Pardoner warns that enduring change does not mean all transitions are pleasant or ethical. Bodies are inextricable from matter's mutability, yet without anima, striving, desire, and rejection, materiality is reduced to entropy. 'Of this matiere, O Paul, wel kanstow trete: / "Metete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto metete, / shal God destroyen bothe,"' states the Pardoner (VI.521–3). If matter is not transformed by a will or force, warns the Pardoner, decay not only in matter but also morals follows. A



figure surrounded by deceased (likely slaughtered) animal parts, himself imaged and written on animal parts, and telling a story of hedonistic betrayal, the Pardoner does not establish change or mutable matter as a good without dangers.

For the Pardoner, drunkenness is not the same as being material but as having one's meaning reduced to mere matter. 'Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure,' says the Pardoner, 'For dronkenesse is verray sepulture / of mannes wit and his discrecioun' (VI.57–9). Without an animus, flesh becomes dead matter, an occasion for mourning, a sepulture that recalls life no longer there. A figure recognized for the potential of being a 'geldyng or a mare,' the Pardoner seems to embody trans textuality's insistence that embodiment is not destiny, so long as there are drives for change: reformation (e.g. the restoration of manuscripts) or transformation (e.g. a mare becoming a Pardoner). A man of relics, calling a body a sepulture does not mean the Pardoner has given up hope. All may have another life so long as we regard matter as alive with a striving for fluidity.

Conclusion

As a feature and method of reading manuscripts, trans textuality may not always be evident on the surface. Often one has to sit some time with a text, as one might with a trans friend, until the bleed through of other times, lives, and images becomes apparent. Trans textuality may look like a moment of anachronism, when a medieval person or text whispers 'transgender' in one's ear, even though the word would not exist for centuries, or when a transgender scholar picks up a manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* and feels the dysphoria in the depths of medieval skin as something already resident in her own. Dysphoria in the depths of medieval skin reaches out with desire and rejection, crosses binaries, and may be uncomfortable to feel and see, yet in its animus of striving lives a resistance to mastery and death. If virgins are deep in the shame of dysphoria, drunkards are thick with its fluid movements, concludes the Pardoner, 'ful of stryvyng' (VI.550). An invaginated man, the drunk is so full of 'stryvyng' he breaks out in queer slantwise directions, this way and that, in and out, like the faces and crosses of the Pardoner's image or the reverse side's colors and shapes. The Pardoner's drunks traverse dysphoria, much like how Deleuze and Guattari describe rhizomes:

they know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND [...] The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 23)



This fluidity moves along the page and not just through verso to recto, from a male to female face. This is a trans animus, a ‘striving,’ that decries all binaries of the page, enduring in the depths of dysphoria, and – by an animus that emerges when skin touches skin, reader touches manuscript – challenges divisions of medieval and post-medieval. Invariably, each reader responds to a text in their own way but Fragment VI is a trans textual machine, inviting those who encounter the manuscript to engage with its depths, durations and dysphoria. For some, discovering that supposedly smooth surfaces are full of pores, holes, and invagination may be discomfoting, affecting them with dysphoria that lives and spreads through the skin. Others may feel shame at the failure to embody constancy or mastery. In the end, Fragment VI seems to offer two model masculinities and femininities but these promises are skin deep, full of holes, enduring illness, drunken strivings, and enough dysphoria to share across the ages.

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