HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1535

Failing Femininities: The Femmes of MS Additional 37049

Baylee Woodley

> ". . . while these objects cannot be simply de-linked from gender norms or histories of oppression, new connections can be formed rendering different understandings."
>
> Hannah McCann, *Queering Femininity,* 2017

In the British Library there is a manuscript known as the Carthusian Miscellany or MS Additional 37049 (c.1460–1500). While modern readers might sit with it in a crowded reading room, their medieval counterpart was likely a Carthusian monk living an anchoritic life in a charterhouse in Northern England.[1] Alternatively, modern readers might click through the digitised version from home and the Carthusian monk might have used it when they broke into the public sphere to educate novices or the laity.[2] Medieval and modern readers alike, however, would open the miscellany to find it abundantly populated with interwoven images and texts.

Appearing on 142 of 192 folios, the illuminations themselves offer insight into the use of the miscellany by its original Carthusian audience. Since no binding or glazing mediums were used to enhance or preserve the images, Samantha Mullany suggests these illuminations were designed for functional use rather than ornamentation.[3] The co-constitutive relationship between the images and texts also evidences a design oriented toward didactic, engaged use by readers. A diagram that spans two folios (72v–73r) is perhaps the best example. Made up of images and texts so interwoven as to be inseparable, this diagram has previously been described as a 'grand flowchart of belief.'[4] It invites readers on a journey from salvation to damnation and back again (fig. 1).

Material remains of the engagement inspired by this didactic design are evident from the very first folios of the manuscript as it exists today. Two

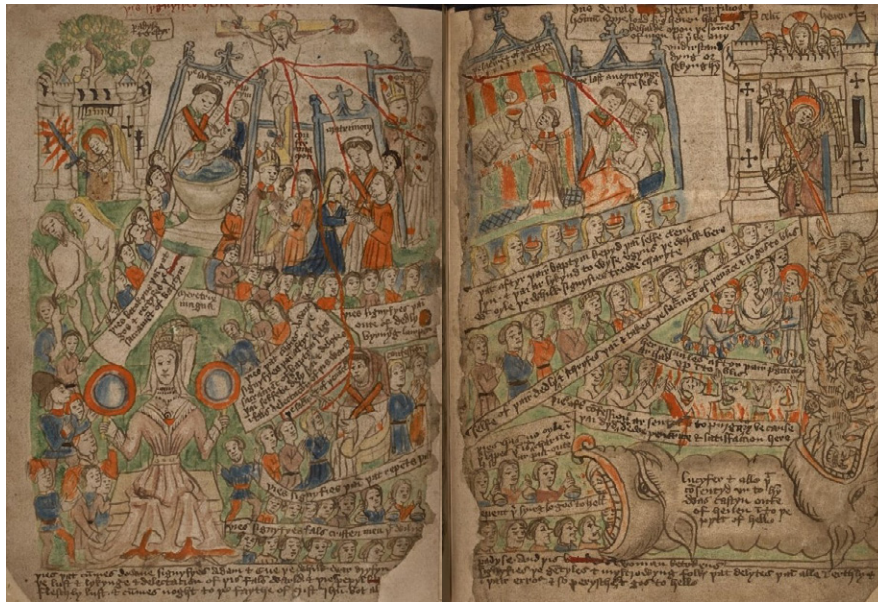

Figure 1 MS Additional 37049, folio 72 *verso* and 73 *recto*. 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on paper, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

diptych-style, half-figure portraits of Mary and Christ fill folios 1v–2r (fig. 2). Standing out on vellum in an otherwise paper manuscript, these portraits were likely added later in the fifteenth century. Jessica Brantley reads this as significant evidence of a performative response as she considers a user so tacitly engaged that they stitched additional devotional images into this already abundantly illuminated object.[5] Having been described as 'a spiritual encyclopaedia' and a 'mixed bag,' it is this functional, performative focus reflected in the illuminations that unites the wide-ranging themes and collected texts in the miscellany.[6]

The illuminations have received previous attention for their performative potential, uses of contemporaneous clothing to signify morality, representations of affective devotion, and crudity.[7] An analysis of gender in the miscellany, however, remains to be done despite the illuminator's reliance on performative, moralised bodies. This paper argues that the miscellany's comprehensive, symbolic nature and abundant imagery make it a rich case study for beginning to think through the complexities of femininity in late

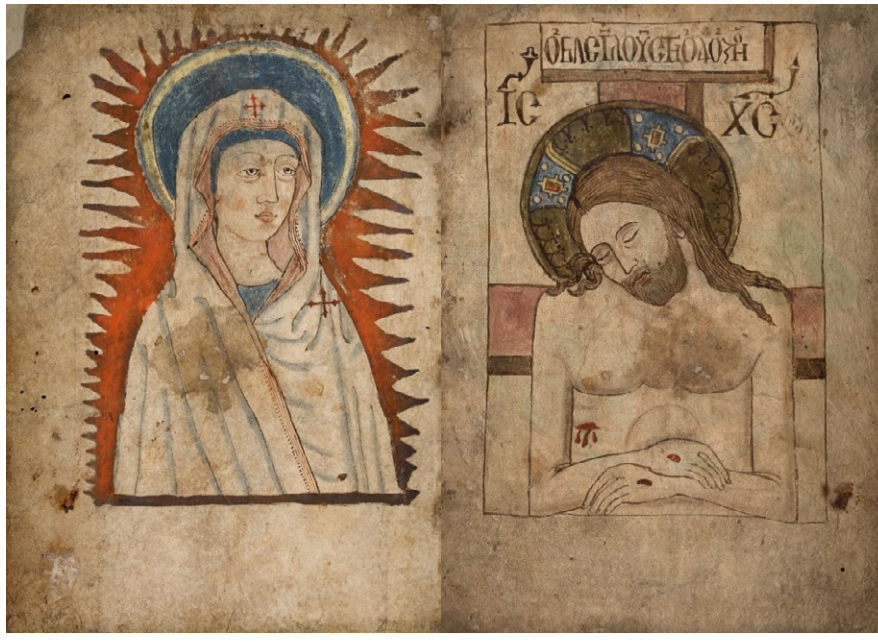

Figure 2 MS Additional 37049, folio 1 *verso* and 2 *recto*. 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on vellum, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

medieval England. From submissive monks and beastly whores to penetrative devotional acts and deadly sins bedecked in all the fashionable excesses of fifteenth-century England, the illuminations in this manuscript can benefit from a framework that accommodates femininities beyond binary bounds. In turn, this manuscript – itself a hybrid creature of poetry, prose, and image – illuminates medieval complexities that invite a rethinking of modern expectations about the past and future of gender.

Fem(me)inine Frameworks: Femmes, Failure, and Femynynytee

The theoretical approach to femininity proposed by this paper draws primarily from the work of Rhea Ashley Hoskin, Hannah McCann, and Jack Halberstam. Alongside these modern guides, medieval uses of the Middle English *femynynytee* are taken up to trace a long history of femininities exceeding categorisable bounds.

Hoskin and McCann are self-identified femmes and femme theorists. Femme as an identifying term in queer communities originated in 1890s

New York as part of the femme/butch dichotomy and is still used as a term of queer self-identification today.[8] Alongside its development as an identity, femme has also been taken up as theory. Femme theory, coined by Hoskin in 2017, might best be described as a branch of queer theory that addresses lacunae in existing queer and feminist studies wherein femininity is dismissed or left unaddressed. Crucially, it asks what femme can *do* as an approach rather than what femme *is* as an identity.[9]

Failure is central to femme theory. McCann sees femme as a material assemblage to which 'recognition of failure is crucial' and advocates 'taking a break from femme as a site of identity politics to consider what femme embodiment "does" in terms of affects, pleasures, failure, and reimagining possibilities,' instead of assuming what femme should do to resist the 'normal.'[10] She includes failures that are simply mistakes – accidental slips of the mascara wand, wobbles in heels, eyeshadow applied with fingertips rather than expensive brushes – in her explorations of 'the radical possibilities of femme.'[11] Applying this model to objects, McCann advocates for 're-considering stereotypically feminine objects and paraphernalia [because] while these objects cannot be simply de-linked from gender norms or histories of oppression, new connections can be formed rendering different understandings.'[12]

This approach to failure is especially pressing for frameworks bringing together femme theory and medieval studies. It ensures that an onus of subversion is not projected onto historical bodies, while still enabling explorations of femme potential. It further removes the impulse to qualify femme bodies as 'other' to a modern 'norm,' making it a useful framework for heeding Karma Lochrie's caution that 'the Middle Ages, including its people, institutions, and culture, never aspired to be normal.'[13] Accommodating accidental failures also acknowledges that, although there was no medieval 'normal,' there was still far to fall in the vertical medieval scale which measured against prelapsarian ideals.

The centrality of failure to the potential of femme is also resonant with Halberstam's foundational book *The Queer Art of Failure,* which is likewise taken up by McCann. Halberstam advocates for the use of low theory, which is 'the theorization of an alternative within an undisciplined form of knowledge production' through eccentric examples and a refusal to 'maintain the *high* in high theory.'[14] I see femme theory as one such 'undisciplined form

of knowledge production' and in this view I am aligned with Halberstam himself who finds unique possibilities in feminine failure. For Halberstam, femininity can be a practice of 'radical passivity' that refuses to resist or take freedom on the terms offered by oppressive systems.[15]

These undisciplined complexities of 'femme' also have resonance with uses of the Middle English terms *femynynytee* and *wommanhede* contemporaneous with the miscellany. Middle English literature presents femininity as a complex of ideal characteristics constituting womanhood, but also as a complex of excessive traits with transformative potential that frequently slips into beastliness or monstrosity uncontainable by species-based – let alone gendered – bounds. Tara Williams argues that *femynynytee* and *wommanhede* were far from conclusively defined and ever-evolving.[16] *Femynynytee* might be a disguise donned by humans teetering on the edge of beastliness, as with the description of the Sultan's wife in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' as a 'serpent under femynynytee.'[17] Femininity here is performed by a figure who – in the same line – is described as a 'virago' [unwomanly woman].[18] She abandons her womanliness but remains able to perform femininity. Even femininity as a complex of ideals might be unbound from the 'female' body by surviving a human-animal transformation as embodied by Calistona in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Being raped renders her a 'foule beste' even while she retains a human body, but her maternal instincts survive her subsequent transformation into a bear.[19]

Assigned male at birth (amab) figures might also perform femininity with transformative effects. Through affective piety amab persons could perform ideal femininities, which – as explored below – might even suggest that premodern hegemonic femininities would have been incongruous with and indeed 'queer' by modern measures.[20] Alternatively, and although 'an eternal lack of control and perfection' was seen as the natural state of persons assigned female at birth (afab), sumptuary laws show that alongside afab bodies being policed, amab bodies were carefully regulated. Sodomy itself was seen by the twelfth-century French theologian Alan de Lille as harbouring the threat of transforming a body from 'the active sex' to 'the passive sex.'[21] Although he was not himself contemporaneous with the miscellany, the afterlife of his *De planctu naturae* can be traced to fourteenth-century England through the writing of a Dominican friar named Robert Holcot who praises his approach to 'the most unspeakable vice.'[22]

Alan de Lille also believed that the reverse transformation was available to 'the passive sex' through virginity. There is not, however, a clear masculine/feminine divide offered by the medieval virgin either. Femininity was both the chaste modesty that could prove virginity and the weakness that was overcome when one was 'raised to the dignity of men' through 'the vow of virginity.[23] Virginity is both required of femininity, insofar as it is referring to a complex of ideal characteristics, and a means by which to surpass feminine failure.

Amid this late medieval mire of femininities, the *Carthusian Miscellany* came into being. The remainder of this paper explores the way femininities are coded in the miscellany in conversation with these medieval and modern frameworks. I explore femininity as vulnerable, ideal, excessive, and (a small step from excess) as beastly or monstrous. I offer not only the first gendered analysis of this encyclopaedic mosh, but also a new, pluralistic approach to late medieval femininities unshackled from presumptions of femaleness or oppression, which can speak back to the modern.

Faithful Femininities: Father, (non-binary) Son, and Suckling Souls

In the upper tiers of the diagrammatic 'spiritual flowchart' on folios 72v–73r of the miscellany are six of the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, matrimony, ordainment, the Eucharist, and anointing the sick. Above the sacraments, Christ appears twice, performing the roles most common to him throughout the manuscript: being crucified, and waiting for souls inside the guarded kingdom of heaven. Since Christ's body is a frequent topic for queer medievalists and Carthusian monks alike, this paper starts with the crucified Christ reigning over the diagram.[24] Christ in this form – crucified or displaying his wounds as a Man of Sorrows – appears fifteen times throughout the miscellany, including in the portraits greeting readers at the beginning.[25]

The two diptych-style portraits of Mary and Christ at the beginning locate the miscellany as a product of the affective piety peaking in popularity from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries which encouraged devotees of all genders to suffer (imaginatively or physically) as Christ suffered. Isolated half-length devotional images like these were 'particularly well-suited to private devotion and profound empathy of the individual.'[26] This image does not locate Christ within the Biblical narrative of the Crucifixion. Instead, it is designed to

evoke eternal empathy with his suffering and locate him in the times of his viewers. His hands appear, for example, not attached to the cross, but folded together to display his wounds for contemplation.

The illuminator also carefully represents the hybridity of Christ that was essential for affective devotion. He is fully exposed with wounds suggestive of past penetrative acts to symbolise his humanity, but the image is precisely cropped above the waist to preserve his divine dignity. These notions of hybridity in Christ were both gendered and spread beyond the bounds of affective piety in late medieval works. The alchemical *Book of the Holy Trinity,* for instance, describes Christ as 'the divine and the human, the feminine and the masculine.'[27] Leah DeVun uses this text to argue that from some medieval perspectives Christ was 'the ultimate non-binary figure.'[28]

Locating a gender-fluid femininity in Christ is central to the logic of medieval affective piety and to queer, feminist approaches to Christ. In her foundational work on the feminisation of religious language that developed alongside affective piety, Caroline Walker Bynum writes that 'what medieval authors assume the female to be coincided with what they increasingly wished to emphasise about God.'[29] The word 'assume' invites femininity in as what is assumed about 'the female' despite its distinctiveness. Bynum clarifies that 'the female (or woman) and the feminine are not the same.'[30] She specifies that historical treatments of women and attitudes toward femininity are distinct since medieval 'male' authors often wax ideological about feminine-coded aspects of themselves. For example, in a sermon, Bernard of Clairvaux urges abbots to 'be gentle, avoid harshness . . . not resort to blows, expose [their] breasts: let [their] bosoms expand with milk not swell with passion.'[31]

Despite her distinction, though, Bynum continues using gendered terms interchangeably, writing that the medieval view labeled 'gentleness, compassion, tenderness, emotionality and love, nurturing and security . . . [as] female or maternal,' before clarifying that these transferable qualities characterise femininity and are often adopted by monks.[32] These conflations between behavioural stereotypes and physiological traits associated with female-coded bodies might be read as essentialist. When looked at with more care, though, this entanglement might be engaged to offer a montage of medieval queer, gender-fluid bodies and senses of self.

On folio 20r (fig. 3) Christ is suffering even more blood loss than in the initial portrait. He uses the fingers of his left hand to frame his chest wound

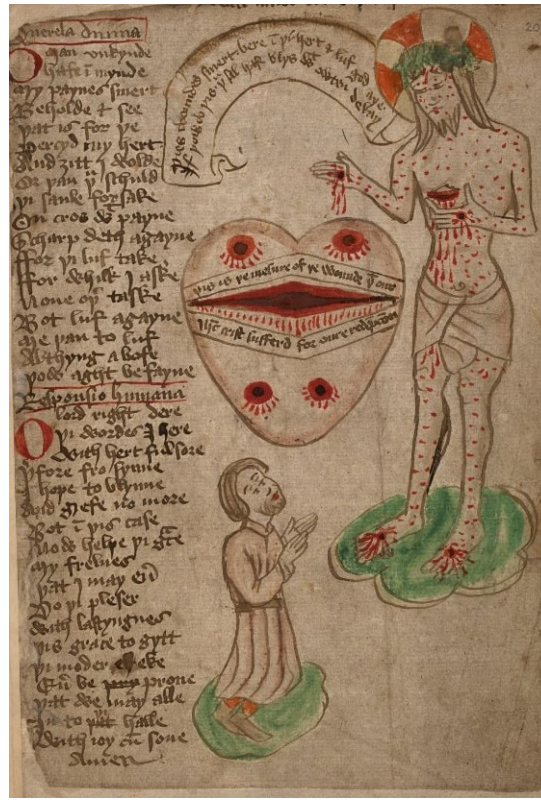

Figure 3 MS Additional 37049, folio 20 *verso*. 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on paper, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

while his right hand extends out to drip blood onto a bleeding heart floating next to him on the page. Alongside inviting audiences to engage in affective piety, this image shows how it is done. The heart is bedecked with the isolated stigmata, which are contemplated from below by a kneeling layman. The vulvic chest wound is central. Christ emphasises it on his torso and it is the focal point in the heart where surrounding text claims 'þis is þe mefure [measure] of þe Wounde [wound] þ[a]t Ih[e]s[u] Crist fufferd [suffered] for oure rede[m]pc[i]on.' Both the insistence that the image represents *the* measure of the wound and Christ's own measuring gesture emphasise the physicality, not only of the wound itself, but of the image through its claim to be preserving the precise measurements of Christ's body. This physical

intimacy is further suggested by the redness of the devotee's lips, which make it appear as though he really has been kissing the wounds of his Saviour.

Contemporaneous sources leave little doubt that this precisely illuminated wound was meant to evoke both physiological traits, such as breasts and vulvas, and behavioural traits often seen as part of the complex of 'femininity.' The writing of the Monk of Farne, for example, describes him in a position similar to that of the layman in the miscellany. He pleads 'do not wean me, good Jesus, from the breasts of thy consolation.'[33] He then relates the fluid physiology of Christ's body to nourishment and mercy, writing, 'I also need to enter again into the womb of my lord' and 'precisely because I am a sinner. . . . thou dost bleed that I may have to drink and open thy side in the desire to draw me within.'[34] As explored further below, there is also something distinctly queer and feminine in the necessity to have first failed – even if only through the failure of Original Sin, inherent to all postlapsarian bodies – before then being eligible to receive intimate salvation through Christ's orifices and erotic in the desire of Christ to 'draw [him] within.'

The medieval physiology of Christ reflected in the miscellany and contemporaneous texts shows feminine behaviours symbolised by physiological traits which themselves range far and beyond binary bodies. Sophie Sexon approaches this matrix of feminine, female, male, and maternal using non-binary language and identity. They approach 'the feminisation of Christ's body not as a restructuring that renders the body wholly female, but as an aspect of Christ's gender identity that lies between' genders.[35] Sexon does not erase the relationship between maternity, Christ, and femininity but queers all three. Sexon turns to an apotropaic birthing scroll decorated with another precisely measured wound, the *arma Christi*, and a cross that can be used to measure the height of Christ to show that Christ's body could be simultaneously 'masculine coded' *and* experience the pains of childbirth.[36] Within the Carthusian order, this view is expressed by Marguerite of Oingt writing to Christ 'your labor pains were so great that your holy sweat was like great drops of blood that came out from your body.'[37]

Femininity does not have to be maternal, maternal does not have to be female, female does not have to be feminine *and* they all intersect in both medieval and modern discourse. Finding a corpus of devotional writing by monks 'free of heteronormative anxiety,' Sarah Salih advocates that 'if indeed there is no norm there is no deviance.'[38] The Carthusian Miscellany shows a

lack of heteronormative anxiety about intimacy between Christ and monks, but also a lack of anxiety about femininity performed by masculine-coded bodies and even an idealising of these bodies. This historical idealisation of bodies which defy stable or binary categorisation offers rich sources in support of modern femmes' insistence on complex femininities insofar as they answer Hoskin's call to 'dislodge patriarchal claims of a naturalised ahistorical femininity' and refute the naturalised associations between feminine ideals and femaleness.[39]

Failed Fires: Late Virgins and Passive Resistance

Returning to the diagram on folio 73r, the seventh sacrament of Penance occupies a more liminal space where two angels lift penitent souls away from the Hellmouth. Above this redemptive sacrament, five figures walk toward Christ in the kingdom of heaven carrying burning torches. These are the wise virgins from the 'Parable of the Virgins' (Matthew 25: 1–13) and they are mirrored in the diagram by their counterparts – the foolish virgins – who constitute their own procession below the sacrament of Penance, in which they do not partake. Carrying upturned empty torches, they march instead toward the Hellmouth.

The 'Parable of the Virgins' tells a story of ten virgins who are told to attend a marriage ceremony with Christ and to bring a torch and keep it burning. The wise virgins bring extra oil, but the foolish virgins forget to do the same. When their oil runs out the wise virgins refuse to share, and the foolish virgins must leave to replenish their supply. They are consequentially late and barred from the marriage ceremony. All ten virgins share their virginity, but the foolish virgins are distinguished by their collective temporal failure, failure to remember what to do, and failure to partake in the sacrament of matrimony which would subject them to Christ.

Like Christ, these wise and foolish virgins also populate other folios. On folio 80v, they proceed diagonally upward with their torches from the right and left respectively with the former wearing red and the latter wearing blue (fig. 4). The wise virgins hold their burning torches upright and text between the converging paths tells readers that the torches of these 'fyfe wyse virgyns' contain 'oyle þat is charyte.' Meanwhile, the foolish virgins stand more clustered together holding their torches limply without flames to support. Readers are told that these virgins with their empty torches represent 'fals

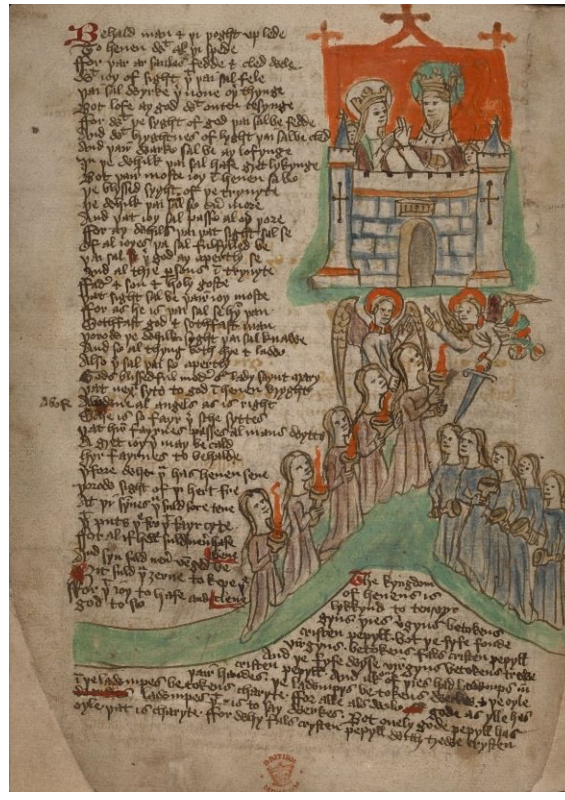

Figure 4 MS Additional 37049, folio 80 *verso*. 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on paper, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

cristen pepyll.' Both the virtuous and the shamed ascend toward the apex of this illumination, but an angel at the top wields a sword toward the head of the first foolish virgin to bar her path and another stern-looking angel rests a hand on the shoulder of the first wise virgin.

Having previously considered femininity in representations of Christ, monks, and the pious laity, I have established that the failures of the foolish virgins and their culmination in the loss of Christ as bridegroom would have been resonant with the concerns of Carthusian readers. Unlike a gender-fluid Christ, the femininity of the foolish virgins does reflect the anxieties of their medieval audience. They embody a loss of intimacy with Christ *and* the vulnerability of the soul as they descend into the Hellmouth with others

who did not partake in the top six sacraments or take the final penitent path to salvation.

These foolish virgins might be read as 'femmes' since they distinguish themselves from ideological femininities through failure.[40] This does not mean, however, that they or their illuminator need to be burdened with an onus of intentional subversion. Like McCann's 'accidental slip of the mascara wand,' these virgins fail by mistake, *and* doing so still locates them in a liminal space that can be productively explored using femme frameworks. Halberstam suggests that 'failure recognises that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant.'[41] Although the foolish virgins are part of diagrams – indeed part of a manuscript – that reinforce dominant logics, their alterity can still be recognised in their failure to succeed and picked up to explore the spaces of alterity within the systems at which they fail so fabulously. Theirs is a passive resistance – they resist by *not* doing – which is the type of failure Halberstam sees as specifically feminine in that it refuses paths of recuperation or liberation that require adopting masculinist values.[42] Halberstam writes that 'forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than inscription.'[43] Their forgetfulness resists the grand logics of the diagram and locates them in a long genealogy of lost and low souls.

Floozy Failures: Whores, Virgins, and Serpentine Sins

When it comes to their failure, though, it might be argued that at least the foolish virgins make an effort. If readers return to the diagram, they will find them in the company of someone even more deeply enmeshed in the project of failure. In fact, from a medieval viewpoint, the *meretrix magna* ('great whore') is the source of all failure. Enthroned on the lower left corner of the diagram in a pink gown with red lining, the *meretrix magna* dominates in the lowest register of this spiritual flowchart (fig. 5). The accompanying text tells audiences that she 'betokens þe lust & lykynge [sensual pleasure] & delectation [desire] of þis fals warld' and that the people gathered around her will 'gos to helle.'[44] It is in this procession of those who 'gos to helle' that the foolish virgins join her damned lineage.

From her seat on the bottom, this so-called 'great whore' embodies a physical and allegorical lowness. In Halberstam's embrace of all things low,

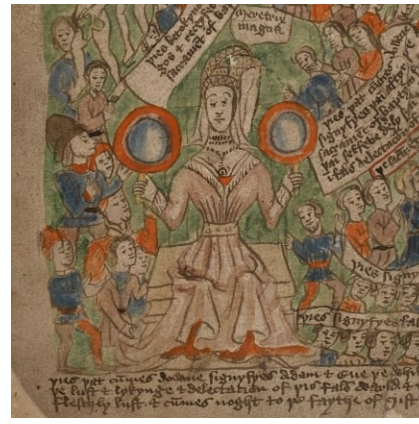

Figure 5 MS Additional 37049, folio 72 *verso* (detail). 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on paper, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

he seeks out figures for a 'shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing.'[45] The *meretrix magna* is precisely such a figure. She occupies a negative space below the accepted performances exalted above her and never joins in the momentum of salvation since she is its antithesis. She also implicates many others in her failure. The *meretrix magna* is part of a lineage that trickles down the left side of folio 72v starting with Eve and Adam being expelled from 'p[ar]adyse terestyr' where a human-faced serpent is coiled around a tree with an apple in its mouth.

The serpent itself evokes feminine possibilities in the great whore's lineage of failure. Although appearing quite androgynous with indistinct features, this serpent and the large contemporaneous corpus of medieval representations of the serpent with long flowing hair might evoke associations with femininity as a disguise as implied in Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale.'[46] John Bonnell traces the origin of representations of this human-serpent hybrid to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries following from literary descriptions.[47] One such visual manifestation appears in a *Speculum humanae salvationis* contemporaneous with the miscellany (Harley MS 2838) where the serpent is nearly identical to Eve.[48] Blue, gold-flecked serpentine body aside, both have long, light brown hair and wear similar expressions (fig. 6). The serpent,

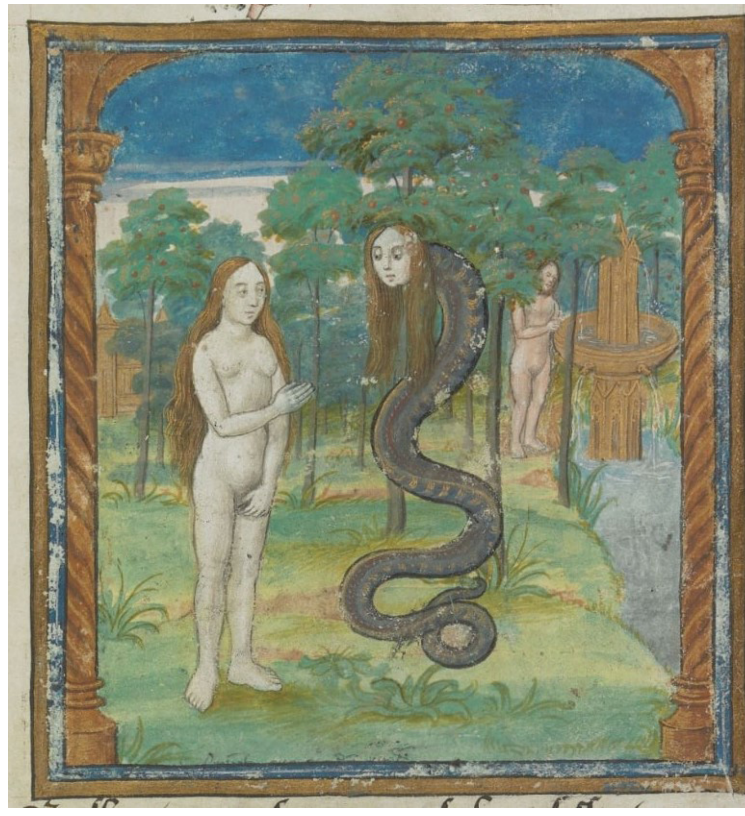

Figure 6 Harley MS 2838, folio 4 *verso* (detail). 1485–1509. Pigment on parchment, 47 × 34.5 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

though, is not the only feminine figure teetering on the edge of human/beast hybridity. The humanness of the *meretrix magna* herself – though perhaps less obviously to the modern viewer – is on unstable ground.

Anne E. Bailey argues that in the medieval worldview those who were gendered excessively feminine might 'conceptually slip beyond the line separating human from animal' in the hierarchy of being where men, women, and animals were located vertically (and in that order) based on their capacities for reason.[49] As seen above, medieval femininity could manifest as a complex of ideals, but the *meretrix magna* invokes another medieval femininity. This femininity – consistent with the models of Galen and Philo Judaeus – was on the lower end of a gender continuum. Bailey writes that 'varying degrees of

masculinity and femininity [were] associated with (but not necessarily fixed to) biological sex' and the 'universal soul was urged to discard femininity and strive for manliness.'[50] According to these medieval models it is lowness that makes the *meretrix magna* feminine and femininity that makes her low.

Bailey's study of sick, monstrous, and excessively feminine bestial bodies shows that femininity – while sometimes an ideal – can also become its own antithesis. Turning to literary tropes wherein beautiful women 'shape-shift into repulsive forms,' she argues that 'excessive femininity was considered an ugly condition in every way' since femininity was associated with moral lowness.[51] Similarly, Williams argues that 'beastliness often takes the shape of an exaggerated femaleness' wherein the monstrous body ceases to be 'truly female,' leaving open the question of what possibilities remain in these no longer sexed, excessive bodies.[52]

The excessive (and excessively symbolic) accoutrements of the *meretrix magna* identify her as a fifteenth-century figure who occupies a liminal space regarding both gender and species. Her lavish attire cites contemporaneous condemnations related to the moral implications of excessive dress as does that of her sinful spawn who populate the miscellany. She is guilty, for example, of the red lining peeking through her gown. Mullaney writes that 'the use of such a colour on an under tunic, which went almost totally unseen, was held to be especially culpable as a boastful expression of wealth by conspicuous waste' since it was such an expensive dye.[53] The *meretrix magna* also evokes contemporaneous condemnations of 'those who are so disgusting and hostile who make themselves more attractive than god made them' with her cinched waist and padded-looking shoulders.[54]

Her patterned, two-pronged headdress is the adornment that most threatens slippage into beastliness. Mullaney writes that such 'horns were considered both beast-like and devilish and so doubly debased the humanity of the wearer.'[55] One medieval moralist describes a woman as 'horned as an unresonabyl best.'[56] John Lydgate offers an instance where the headdress might be seen as a site of resistance through medieval eyes. He writes that 'hornes wer yove [given] to bestys for dyffence [defence]/a thyng contrarye to femynyte/to be maad sturdy of resystence.'[57] Donning horns in Lydgate's view makes one 'sturdy of resystence' and contrary to the ideals of femininity cited in the poem including 'mercifulle pyte,' 'humylyte,' and 'chastyte,' which leaves only femininity as spiritual lowness for those flaunting beastly

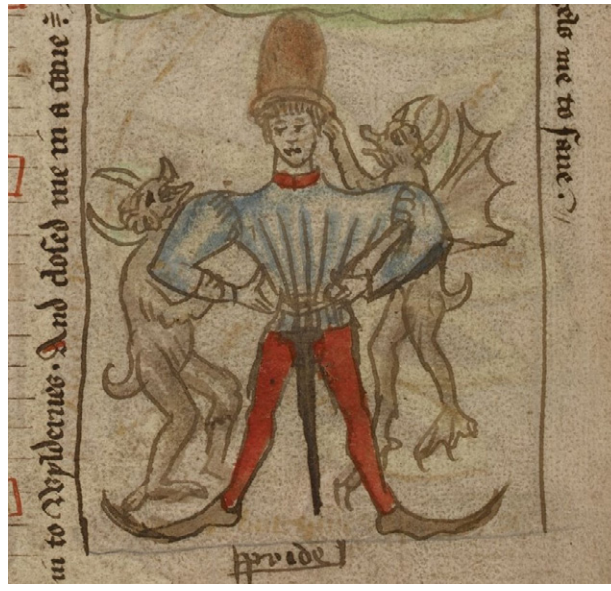

Figure 7 MS Additional 37049, folio 47 *verso* (detail). 1460–1500. Pigment and ink on paper, 27 × 20 cm. British Library, London, UK. © British Library.

horns.[58] The Whore of Babylon herself is frequently given horned headgear, and this apocalyptic figure extends the lineage of the *meretrix magna* forward to the end times when she makes her apocalyptic entrance 'arrayed in purple and scarlet colour' and marked as 'the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth' (Revelations 17: 4–5).[59]

Addressing lavish adornments, another medieval moralist claims that 'the devyl hath maryid Pride to wommen.'[60] In the Carthusian Miscellany the horned *meretrix magna* is associated with both the devil and Pride. An allegorical image of Pride on folio 47v (fig. 7) commits sins of excess remarkably similar to those of the great whore herself. The adornment of this moralising figure shows that condemnations of excess and – to use Roland Betancourt's productive anachronism – 'slut-shaming', such as those surrounding the *meretrix magna* are not isolated to presumptions of 'femaleness.'[61] Mullaney describes this figure noting that his chest is 'improved and emphasized by padding, and with unnaturally wide shoulders. His tightly belted waist is so narrow that it suggests corseting.'[62] She further notes his condemning red under tunic. Where the *meretrix magna* is excessive in her headgear, however,

this figure is excessive in his footwear. A fifteenth-century statute limits the wearing of 'shoes or boteux [boots], havyng pykes passyng the lengh if .ij. ynches' [two inches] – a prohibition flouted in excess by the figure of Pride in the Carthusian Miscellany.[63]

A phallic sheath hanging between his thighs also goes to excessive lengths to provoke intersecting associations of femininity, maleness, and masculinity. In his work on female masculinities, Halberstam writes about performers who 'clearly exaggerate masculinity' and suggests that 'in them, masculinity tips into feminine performance.'[64] For Halberstam, excess tips the scales toward femininity even when masculinity is being engaged. This is perhaps not far from the medieval view, wherein femininity is the disguise that needs to be shed to achieve the Galenic heights of masculinity, and excess – even when it is beastly – is expressed as femininity.

Excess was further related to femininity – and effeminacy – through associations with sodomy (itself linguistically feminine in Latin as *sodomia*). The fifteenth-century theologian Thomas Gascoigne warns that 'ornatus virorum' or 'the finery of men' causes many evils among which 'sodomia' is listed. He turns slut-shaming on men who 'show off the shape of their thighs and their genitals through the slit in their gown, and do not now use breeches, but stockings, in which the shape of the size of their members is displayed in a shameful fashion.'[65] Thomas further specifies that this 'male' finery has its roots in 1429, suggesting that contemporaneous with the Carthusian Miscellany was a sense that excess among men in England – spawning sodomy as it went – was having new social consequences.[66]

His text speaks to 'premodern notions of sodomy as a fluid and disorderly category of carnality' that was feminine as an orientation toward fleshliness and vanity, but also as an orientation that haunted all postlapsarian bodies tainted by Eve's original feminine failure and thereby vulnerable to taking 'the wrong moral course' in diagrams of salvation.[67] Robert Mills suggests that Eve might even be seen as the first sodomite for her role in this original failure and the *meretrix magna* herself could provoke associations – for medieval or modern viewers – with the 'perversely queeny' Queen of Sodom personified in an eleventh-century letter by the monk Peter Damian who remains more 'she-monster' than 'female'.[68]

The *meretrix magna*'s sinful lineage continues in her implicated audience. She holds two mirrors facing directly out at the viewer – gazing back like

spectacles at a potentially bespectacled audience – perhaps suggesting their vulnerability to her temptations.[69] Vulnerability to worldly pleasures was more relevant to her mothering, suckling Carthusian audience in their northern charterhouse than might initially be presumed. Brantley writes that 'monks increasingly prayed for the souls of wealthy benefactors, and also accepted those benefactors within the charterhouse walls.'[70] Citing statutes contemporaneous to MS Additional 37049, she demonstrates that this crossover 'led to increased luxury – and more art – in the austere environment of the charterhouse.'[71] The moral implications of excess, therefore, would not have been far removed from the subjectivities of the miscellany's medieval readers.

Cumulatively, the lineage of the *meretrix magna* – resonant of Halberstam's queer feminist genealogy wherein 'all losers are the heirs of those who lost before them' – is opposed to the hegemonic reproduction happening above where the wise virgins ascend toward the kingdom of heaven and the seven sacraments are performed.[72] Those partaking in this reproduction of salvation-bound action are touched by weblike tendrils of blood that spread over the parchment from the wound of Christ. They – regardless of their own gender – join the bloodline of Father and (gender-fluid) Son. The *meretrix magna* on the other hand is in a lineage that emphasises her irredeemable body and its disruptions of hegemonic reproduction.

This diagram guides viewers – as it has guided this paper – in a procession that emerges from the Original Sin of Eve and Adam and winds its sinful way down to the loose woman responsible for all moral failings. It gives the option of repenting and, through failing and being recuperated, the possibility of intimacy with Christ. Alternatively, the vulnerable soul might continue to manifest the available failures that haunt all postlapsarian bodies in Eve's sodomitic lineage and eventually march into the Hellmouth. The *meretrix magna* represents the lowest and most sinful point from which viewers might 'choose their own adventure' so to speak. In this diagram of salvation whores and foolish virgins alike fit Halberstam's framework of passivity by refusing to resist or take freedom (salvation) on the terms of oppressive systems.[73] As they march into the Hellmouth accompanied by any viewers who are implicated (or perhaps willingly reflected through their own passive resistance) in the *meretrix magna*'s mirrors, they have failed the lifestyle quiz diagrammed before them.

Having approached these medieval femininities through the lens of femme theory, this paper has not aimed to find a legacy of revolution-stirring, empowered bodies in the medieval. On the contrary, the medieval feminine body is often at the bottom of the ladder, wounded, or descending into an awaiting Hellmouth. It is in these murky complexities, though, that there is potential for rethinking how femininity operates in both medieval and contemporary worldviews and thus how it can be imagined into the future.

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to Robert Mills and Cadence Kinsey for their invaluable support and their thoughtful feedback on *many* versions of this paper over the past year. I am grateful as well to the external reviewer and to the editors of *Object* for the opportunity to share my work and develop it further through the review process.

Notes

1 Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.
2 Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 13.
3 Samantha Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality in B.L. MS Add. 37049,' in *Texts and Their Contexts: Papers from the Early Book Society*, ed. John Scattergood and Julia Boffey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 72–73.
4 Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness,* 201.
5 Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness,* 170.
6 Douglas Gray, 'London, British Library, Additional MS 37049 – A Spiritual Encyclopedia,' in *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale*, ed. by Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 99; Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 72.
7 See: Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*; Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality'; Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1984), 62.
8 Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 59.
9 Hannah McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 7; Rhea Ashley Hoskin, *Feminizing Theory: Making Space for Femme Theory* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2021), Introduction.
10 *Ibid.*, 118, 127.
11 *Ibid.*, 127.
12 *Ibid.*, 124.
13 Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.

14 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 18 and 16.
15 *Ibid.*, 139 and 145.
16 Tara Williams, *Inventing Womanhood Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 3–4.
17 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 92, l. 360.
18 'Virago,' *Middle English compendium* (Regents of the University of Michigan), accessed April 4, 2022.
19 Williams, *Inventing Womanhood*, 63; John Gower, *Confessio Amantis,* ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute for TEAMS in association with the University of Rochester, 2006), Book V, ll. 6275.
20 To avoid the reification of identifying terms and signify their fluidity, I avoid the capitalisation of acronyms.
21 Michelle M. Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 69; Alan de Lille, *Plaint of Nature,* trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 68.
22 Robert Holcot, *Super libros sapientiae* (1494) reproduced Frankfurt: Minerva G.M.B.H., 1974, n.p. Cited in Noah Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 96.
23 Thomas Aquinas, I Corinthians, chapter 11, lectio 2. Cited in Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture,* 112.
24 See, for example, works by Robert Mills, Karma Lochrie, Sophie Sexon, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Leah DeVun.
25 See folios: 2r, 20r, 23r, 24r, 33r, 36v, 37r, 45r, 48v, 62v, 67v, 68v, 69v, 72v, 91r. This is my own count and I did not include illuminations of Christ in Majesty even though in these as well (see folio 17r) he might be displaying his wounds.
26 Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 48.
27 Anonymous, *Livre de la tres sainte trinite,* Beinecke Library, Yale University, Mellon MS 74, fol. 24r–v. Cited in Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 185.
28 *Ibid.*, 186.
29 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages, Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, UCLA, vol.16 (13 June 1984): 134.
30 *Ibid.*, 167.
31 Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 1, PL 182: cols. 72 and 76A-C, trans. Bruno Scott James, *The Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux* (London, 1953) and Sermon 23, par. 2, OB 1:139–40, trans. by Kiliam Walsh, *On the Song of Songs 2:27,* The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux 2, Cistercian Fathers Series 4 (Spencer, Massachusetts, 1971): 57–58. Cited in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 116–118.
32 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother,* 148.
33 The Monk of Fame, *The Monk of Farne: The Meditations of a Fourteenth-Century Monk,* trans. a Benedictine nun of Stanbrook, ed. Hugh Farmer (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 182–183. Cited in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 152.
34 *Ibid.*, 182–183. Cited in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 152.

35 Sophie Sexon, 'Gender-Queering Christ's Wounds,' in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography,* ed. Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 136.
36 *Ibid.*, 138.
37 Marguerite of Oingt, *Pagina meditationum*, chaps. 30–39, *Les oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt*, ed. and trans. Antonin Duraffour, P. Gardette and P. Durdilly (Paris: l'Institut de linguistique romane de Lyon, 1965), 77–79. Cited in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 153.
38 Sarah Salih, 'Transvestism in the Anchorhold,' in *The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group,* ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 149.
39 Hoskin and Taylor, 'Femme Resistance,' 295 and 294.
40 *Ibid.*, 288.
41 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.
42 *Ibid.*, 128.
43 *Ibid.,* 15.
44 *Ibid.*, 202.
45 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 129.
46 Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 92, l. 360.
47 John K. Bonnell, 'The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play,' *American Journal of Archaeology* 21, no. 3 (1917): 255.
48 *Ibid.*, 259.
49 Anne E. Bailey. 'The Female Condition: Gender and Deformity in High-Medieval Miracle Narratives.' *Gender & History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 436.
50 *Ibid.*, 429.
51 *Ibid.*, 435.
52 Williams, *Inventing Womanhood*, 58.
53 *Ibid.*, 76.
54 'Robert Mannynge of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne, 1303*,' in *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook,* edited by Louise M. Sylvester, Mark C. Chambers, and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 142–145.
55 Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 81.
56 G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters & of the English People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 400. Cited in Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 81.
57 John Lydgate, *A Selection from the Minor Poems of Dan John Lydgate,* ed. J.O. Halliwell (Oxford: The Percy Society, 1840), 47.
58 *Ibid.*, 48.
59 *Ibid.*, 142.
60 Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 95–96. Cited in Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 82.
61 Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 4.
62 Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 76.
63 'Edward IV: Statute of 1463–1464,' in *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook,* ed. Louise M. Sylvester, Mark C. Chambers, and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 226–229.

64 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 235.
65 Thomas Gascoigne (1403–58): *Loci e Libro Veritatum,*' in *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook,* ed. Louise M. Sylvester, Mark C. Chambers, and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 152–153.
66 *Ibid.*, 152–153.
67 Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages,* 296–297.
68 *Ibid.*, 5, 134.
69 Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 95–96. Cited in Mullaney, 'Fashion and Morality,' 82.
70 Jessica Brantley, 'The Visual Environment of Carthusian Texts: Decoration and Illustration in the Foyle Manuscript,' in *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, and Readers,* ed. Jill Mann and Maura Nolan (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 177.
71 *Ibid.*, 177.
72 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 121.
73 *Ibid.*, 145.