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Birds, Blood, and Nonbinary Bodies in Marie de France's "Yonec"

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Aylin Malcolm

In medieval as in modern writing, birds put pressure on both the gender binary and the human-animal divide. To some degree, birds invite comparisons with humans, who possess certain characteristics that are more prevalent in birds than in mammals—such as bipedalism, a keen sense of sight, and a tendency to pair-bond. Indeed, scholars from Aristotle to present-day psychologists and linguists have considered whether birdsong might bear similarities to human speech.[1] At the same time, sexual differentiation in birds tends to operate differently from human concepts of gender, especially cultural notions of women's beauty and vulnerability: males of some species are smaller than females, and many male birds flaunt brightly colored feathers to engage comparatively drab females. Instances of birds presenting different sex-specific traits, whether simultaneously or over the course of their lives, further demonstrate the inadequacy of human norms and language next to the variety

My warmest thanks to Noa Nikolsky, Nat Rivkin, and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on drafts of this article. I am also grateful for the comments I received on an earlier version that I presented at the Early Modern Trans Studies II conference in November 2022.

[1] For Aristotle's explanations of birdsong, see *History of Animals*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. A. L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library 438 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 536a–b; *Parts of Animals*, ed. and trans. A. L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library 323 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 660a–b. For medieval perspectives, see Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11–54. For modern studies of birdsong in relation to human language, see Kentaro Abe and Dai Watanabe, "Songbirds Possess the Spontaneous Ability to Discriminate Syntactic Rules," *Nature Neuroscience* 14, no. 8 (2011): 1067–74, doi.org/10.1038/nn.2869; Tim Sainburg et al., "Parallels in the Sequential Organization of Birdsong and Human Speech," *Nature Communications* 10 (2019): 3636, doi.org/10.1038/ s41467-019-11605-y.

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of gender expressions found in nature.[2] Birds therefore suggest alternative ways of conceptualizing gender, or at least alternative metaphors; it is not surprising that "egg" is a common term in online communities to denote a trans person who has not yet come to terms with their gender identity.[3]

The metaphorical functions of birds in medieval texts are extremely complex and varied, ranging from allegorizations of birds as monastic ideals to depictions of the nightingale as a figure of tragedy (as in retellings of the myth of Philomela), the poet, or the Christian soul.[4] With respect to gender, medieval writers could invoke the same species to convey different or even contradictory ideas. For instance, poetry and technical manuals drew on a conventional association between falcons and women to make antifeminist claims about the difficulty of controlling both. However, as Sara Petrosillo has argued, textual and visual depictions of women holding raptors, and thus metaphorically controlling their own bodies, could unsettle gender hierarchies by reframing this convention.[5]

Marie de France's *Yonec* further transforms this antifeminist tradition by using a hawk to explore and problematize the relationships among bodies, gender, and control. In this twelfth-century Old French *lai*, a noblewoman pursues a love affair with Muldumarec, a shapeshifting knight who transitions between human and hawk forms, even assuming their lover's appearance in one notable instance.[6] While studies of gender

[2] For instance, female fowl may develop "masculine" pigmentation or behaviors after ceasing egg production. In rare cases, birds may express "feminine" characteristics on one side of the body and "masculine" on the other, a condition known as bilateral gynandromorphy. For an overview, see Andrew T. Major and Craig A. Smith, "Sex Reversal in Birds," *Sexual Development* 10, no. 5–6 (2016): 288–300, doi.org/10.1159/000448365.

[3] Although many non-avian animals hatch from eggs, colloquial uses of this term often clearly indicate birds, including references to being "a chick on the inside." See "Egg (Transgender)," Know Your Meme, modified November 2023, knowyourmeme.com/memes/egg-transgender.

[4] For an example of the former, see Willene B. Clark, *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's "Aviarium"* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992). Wendy Pfeffer surveys the nightingale motif in *The Change of Philomel: The Nightingale in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985).

[5] Sara Petrosillo, "Flying, Hunting, Reading: Rethinking Falcon-Woman Comparisons," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 54, no. 1 (2018): 9–33, doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.2109.

[6] I use gender-neutral pronouns for Muldumarec to reflect their fluid gender presentation. In doing so, I am not attempting to exactly replicate how the text handles gendered

in *Yonec* have often concentrated on the lady, scholars have long recognized Muldumarec's fluid relationships to both gender and humanity.[7] Indeed, essays published thirty years ago describe them as an "androgynous shape-changer" who "destabilize[es] … corporal categories and identities."[8] More recently, Petrosillo has compared the knight's transformations to the lady's "hawklike enclosure" in (and control over) a series of confining spaces, while Elizabeth Liendo has argued that Muldumarec's shapeshifting allows them to "queer gender norms from the very beginning" of the poem, foreshadowing what she calls their "physical feminization" via impalement.[9]

vocabulary, since the Old French text frequently omits pronouns. Muldumarec does occasionally refer to themselves using masculine forms, which could arguably be read as neutral (e.g., ami/amis in lines 125 and 134).

[7] On the lady, see Kimberly Tate Anderson, "Yonec's Mother: Rereading the Signs of the Maternal Body," *Le Cygne*, third series, 3 (2016): 7–20; Joanne Findon, "Supernatural Lovers, Liminal Women, and the Female Journey," *Florilegium* 30 (2013): 27–52, doi.org/10.3138/flor.30.27; Michelle A. Freeman, "The Changing Figure of the Male: The Revenge of the Female Storyteller," in *In Quest of Marie de France, a Twelfth-Century Poet*, ed. Chantal A. Maréchal (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 243–61; Jean-Marie Kauth, "Barred Windows and Uncaged Birds: The Enclosure of Woman in Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46, no. 2 (2010): 34–67, doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1838.

[8] Rupert T. Pickens, "The Poetics of Androgyny in the *Lais* of Marie de France: *Yonec*, *Milun*, and the General *Prologue*," in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture: Selected Papers from the Seventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 211–19 at 213; Stephen G. Nichols, "Deflections of the Body in the Old French Lay," *Stanford French Review* 14 (1990): 27–50 at 36.

[9] Sara Petrosillo, *Hawking Women: Falconry, Gender, and Control in Medieval Literary Culture* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2023), 93; Elizabeth Liendo, "The Wound that Bleeds: Violence and Feminization in the *Lais* of Marie de France," *Neophilologus* 104, no. 1 (2020): 19–32 at 30, 20, doi.org/10.1007/s11061-019-09614-9.

In contrast, Thomas R. Schneider reads Muldumarec as representing a "static masculinity" that persists despite their physical transformations. As I will discuss below, Muldumarec's chivalric identity is relatively stable insofar as it pertains to social class, but Schneider's analysis is limited by the difficulty of defining a consistent concept of masculinity across the *lais*. For Schneider, "knightly masculinity" suggests "a skilled fighter, strong, just, physically perfect, attracted to women, capable of suffering, and loyal in love"; however, Marie's women are "defined in terms of similar virtues, minus those of physical strength and military prowess," neither of which is particularly relevant to Muldumarec. See "The Chivalric Masculinity of Marie de France's Shape-

Trans theory offers a vital contribution to this conversation through its investment in the material conditions of the body, encouraging us to pay close attention to Muldumarec's physical transformations in relation to other classificatory systems and social hierarchies. In particular, recent work on the material and ideological links between trans experiences and animality can guide closer scrutiny of the co-construction of gender and species in medieval thought.[10] Conversely, as scholars such as Emma Campbell and Leah DeVun have demonstrated, texts like *Yonec* can expand current theoretical discussions by revealing how variably "natural" sex and gender have been defined in the past, including how these categories have intersected with race, species, and class.[11]

In this article, I read Muldumarec as nonbinary—a term that I use in DeVun's sense of "bodies that fit uneasily into premodern male-female binaries"—and consider how *Yonec* might expand our understanding of both trans history and premodern theories of humanity.[12] I do not attempt to provide a definitive account of how initial audiences would have approached this text, an imaginative work that may not have actually provoked the type of philosophical discussion in which I engage here. Instead, I use *Yonec* as a starting point for exploring a variety of premodern views of gender. Drawing briefly on medieval medicine, falconry, and theology, I contemplate how these knowledge traditions might have

Changers," *Arthuriana* 26, no. 3 (2016): 25–40 at 28, 30, doi.org/10.1353/art.2016.0016.

[10] See, e.g., Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, "Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans* Life," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2015): 195–208, doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867446; Myra J. Hird, "Animal Trans," in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Myra J. Hird and Noreen Giffney (London: Ashgate, 2008), 227–47.

[11] Emma Campbell, "Visualizing the Trans-Animal Body: The Hyena in Medieval Bestiaries," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 235–66, doi.org/10.7591/cornell/ 9781501759086.003.0011; Leah DeVun, "Animal Appetites," *GLQ* 20, no. 4 (2014): 461–90, doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2721348; Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), esp. chapters 2–4. As the previous article in this issue has shown, modern conceptions of gender are also highly plural, and scholars in Indigenous studies have offered vital critiques of colonial cisheteronormative gender binaries.

[12] DeVun, *Shape of Sex*, 10.

understood the hawk-knight and their actions throughout the poem. I begin this thought experiment with the motif of blood, which amply reveals the inadequacy of binary frameworks for describing Muldumarec's body.[13] Here, I also touch on a second meaning of "blood," namely reproduction and futurity: I argue that Muldumarec's bleeding and death disrupt cisheteropatriarchal social structures by associating them with childbirth.[14] Notably, *Yonec* seems to endorse such disruptions, though it falls short of any fully realized depiction of genderqueer parenting.

In the final section, I explore the implications of Muldumarec's portrayal for histories of what scholars increasingly call "tranimacies," or the interrelations among "transgender, animal, animacy, [and] intimacies."[15] Here as well, I find that the *lai* avoids directly condemning gender or species variance, despite their lethal consequences for Muldumarec. I also address the interweaving of gender and species with the more stable system of social class, drawing on medieval associations between large raptors and nobility. Blood and animality converge in my concluding analysis of a passage in which Muldumarec receives the Eucharist, in defiance of the doctrinal view that denied salvation to nonhumans. I suggest that this unconventional episode implicitly uses the Eucharist to validate nonbinary views of nature and gender. Though trans and genderqueer people have long faced dehumanization and objectification, *Yonec* thus offers an alternative and distinctly medieval view of gender and species variance as liberatory—of trans experiences not as

[13] For a complementary study of gender and the humors in the twelfth-century *Cause et cure*, and particularly phlegm as an "intersex substance," see François·e Charmaille, "Intersex Between Sex and Gender in *Cause et cure*," *Exemplaria* 33, no. 4 (2021): 327–43, doi.org/10.1080/ 10412573.2021.1991720.

[14] For a comparable analysis of the material, genealogical, and theological meanings of blood in *The King of Tars*, see Sarah Star, "*Anima Carnis in Sanguine Est*: Blood, Life, and *The King of Tars*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 115, no. 4 (2016): 442–62, doi.org/10.5406/ jenglgermphil.115.4.0442.

[15] Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska, and Anthony Clair Wagner, "Introduction: Thinking Linking," *Angelaki* 22, no. 2 (2017): 1–10 at 1, doi.org/10.1080/ 0969725X.2017.1322801. This term derives from work by Mel Y. Chen; see "Tranimacies: An Interview with Mel Y. Chen," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2015): 317–23, doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867666.

*de*humanizing, but as aligned with *more-than*-human life in ways that transcend limiting gender frameworks and mechanisms of social control.[16]

Flesh and Blood: Humoral Theory and Futurity

At the opening of *Yonec*, the nameless protagonist has been trapped in a tower by her possessive husband for over seven years. Isolated from the world, she has lost her beauty and barely retained her will to live. One morning, she prays for a lover to comfort her, whereupon a goshawk tumbles through her window and fixes her in its gaze. The hawk then transforms into a strikingly beautiful knight named Muldumarec, who claims to have long loved her from afar. The lady remains unconvinced that their intentions are pure, so the hawk-knight proposes to assume her form in order to demonstrate their Christian faith:

> Le semblant de vus prendrai,
> Le cors Deu receverai,
> Ma creance vus dirai tute. (161–63)
>
> (I will take on your appearance,
> I will receive the body of God,
> I will say my whole creed for you.)[17]

Exactly how this second transformation is accomplished is ambiguous. The pair retreats to the bed without touching or kissing and the old woman charged with guarding the lady enters the room, followed by the priest whom the lady requests. Neither notices anything amiss, suggesting that they perceive only the lady's presence. It is possible that one person conceals themselves in these moments, although the text makes no mention of this; alternately, Muldumarec and the lady may have fused into a single body, an interpretation often favored by scholars.[18] Muldumarec then receives the Eucharist and the lovers begin a sexual relationship. At this point, the text describes the couple as lying alongside

[16] On objectification and dehumanization in relation to gender, race, and sexuality, see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 30–55.

[17] Text and translation from Marie de France, "Yonec," in *The* Lais *of Marie de France: Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. Claire M. Waters (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2018), 210–39. All line numbers refer to this edition.

[18] See, e.g., Nichols, "Deflections of the Body," 37; Petrosillo, *Hawking Women*, 80.

each other (191–92) but does not indicate whether the knight has returned to their previous human—or indeed avian—form.

The ensuing narrative includes several other physical transformations. Revitalized by her lover's affection, the lady regains her beauty, which arouses her husband's suspicions. He discovers the state of affairs from the old woman, who has noticed Muldumarec's visits, and installs spikes on the window. The next time they arrive, Muldumarec impales themselves on one of the spikes, falls bleeding on the lady's bed, informs her that she is pregnant, and quickly leaves. The lady then pursues them out the window and follows their bloody trail through a hill to a walled city built entirely of silver. She wanders through the city's eerily silent palace, passing by several other sleeping knights until she finds the dying Muldumarec, who gives her a ring that will make her husband forget her adultery. The poem concludes with the couple's son Yonec, now grown to adulthood, avenging his parent by killing the lady's husband and assuming governance of Muldumarec's realm, while the lovers are reunited in the same tomb. Despite its occasional playfulness, this *lai* thus presents striking scenes of violence and suffering, often precipitated by a change in a character's appearance; in *Yonec*, boundaries are flexible, but looks can kill.

The remainder of this section addresses one aspect of this violence, namely Muldumarec's wounding and bleeding, in relation to medieval and particularly medical models of gender. Though any summary of the diverse field of premodern medicine will necessarily be incomplete, it is fair to say that medieval writers often adhered to the Aristotelian notion of blood as the most fundamental of the four humors and the point of origin for a number of other bodily fluids.[19] According to this model, the hotter and drier bodies of men could refine blood into the purer form of semen, whereas women's colder bodies were unable to burn off excessive substances from food, resulting in the expulsion of these excesses via menstruation. An inferior form of blood that endangered men who came

[19] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 158; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 184. On Marie's possible use of humoral frameworks in another *lai*, see Kimberly T. Anderson, "Nature and Nurture: *Les Deux Amanz* and Marie de France's Deconstruction of Aristotelian Rational/Material Binaries," *Medieval Ecocriticisms* 3 (2023): 11–30.

into contact with it, menstrual fluid was then converted into breast milk after childbirth.[20] Some texts also depicted blood as having a degree of agency, capable of destroying or animating other living things—a capacity that it often retained once emitted from the body.[21]

Blood may therefore be understood as both gendered and potentially gender*ing*, with the ability to alter the bodies through which it moves. That said, scholars have expressed different opinions regarding its transformative functions in chivalric literature. In a monograph focusing on French romance, Peggy McCracken distinguishes between men's blood, shed publicly and voluntarily in service of military conquest and knights' reputations, and women's blood, which—despite the lack of explicit references to menstruation in these texts—flows uncontrollably and privately, with limited impact on the world.[22] Indeed, McCracken claims that even when men bleed in ostensibly private environments, such

[20] For instance, men were sometimes said to contract leprosy from sexual contact with a menstruating woman. See Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 84–132; Bettina Bildhauer, "Medieval European Conceptions of Blood: Truth and Human Integrity," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): S57–76 at S58, S70, doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12016. Bynum identifies a more positive strain of thinking about menstruation as a necessary aspect of the "blood of birthing"; *Wonderful Blood*, 18–19.

One exception to the binary gendering of blood was the anti-Semitic trope of menstruating Jewish men, on which see Willis Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *Journal of Medieval History* 24, no. 3 (1998): 273–95; Irven M. Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2000): 241–63, doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000025323. Conversely, the Virgin Mary was sometimes said not to menstruate, a trait that theologians found difficult to reconcile with her role as the mother of Christ. See Charles T. Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," *Speculum* 56, no. 4 (1981): 710–27, esp. 718–21, doi.org/10.2307/2847360.

[21] Bildhauer, "Medieval European Conceptions of Blood," S64–67; Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 161–72.

[22] Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 10–20. This interpretation of chivalric literature contrasts with the claim, common in scientific texts, that menstruating women could adversely affect humans and environments around them. See Bildhauer, "Medieval European Conceptions of Blood," S70; Monica H. Green, "Flowers, Poisons and Men: Menstruation in Medieval Western Europe," in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, ed. Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 51–64, esp. 58–60.

as the beds of their lovers, their blood becomes the object of public scrutiny. In contrast, Megan Leitch argues that Thomas Malory's depictions of knights such as Tristan and Lancelot bleeding in bed are "feminizing exceptions" to McCracken's rule because these episodes signal the loss of the knight's reputation, linking social upheaval to disruptions of the gender binary.[23]

In *Yonec*, blood connects the private space of the bedroom with the exterior world, as Muldumarec bleeds across the lady's bed, their own, and the terrain in between. Their blood is not easily contained by physical or conceptual boundaries, and while it does give rise to "lasting change," the lady is its only known witness, challenging McCracken's notion of men's blood as eliciting public recognition.[24] For instance, Muldumarec stains the lady's bedsheets when they are first wounded (315–16), an image that Liendo views as "feminiz[ing] the body of the knight" by evoking both menstruation and loss of virginity.[25] To build on this reading, I want to suggest that Muldumarec's blood is particularly disruptive to medieval

[23] Megan G. Leitch, "(Dis)Figuring Transgressive Desire: Blood, Sex, and Stained Sheets in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," in *Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the "Morte Darthur,"* ed. David Clark and Kate McClune (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 21–38 at 28.

[24] The lady's witnessing also evokes the medieval association between blood and sight: blood was used to restore vision, and Jewish men were said to be born blind and to bleed uncontrollably. See Andrew Colin Gow, "'Sanguis Naturalis' and 'Sanc de Miracle': Ancient Medicine, 'Superstition' and the Metaphysics of Mediaeval Healing Mircles," *Sudhoffs Archiv* 87, no. 2 (2003): 129–58; Francesca Matteoni, "The Jew, the Blood and the Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Folklore* 119, no. 2 (2008): 182–200 at 192–93, doi.org/10.1080/00155870802056985.

[25] Liendo, "Wound that Bleeds," 23. In Liendo's view, Muldumarec transitions fully from one side of the gender binary to the other as they are penetrated by a phallic spike, producing a wound that evokes a vulva, an association that is also conventional in medieval depictions of Christ's side wound. However, much as *Yonec* also permits readings of Muldumarec as nonbinary or genderfluid, scholars have not always read Christ's wound as straightforwardly feminizing. For example, Karma Lochrie refers to "the polymorphousness of Christ's body, with its feminine genital wound and its simultaneous masculine properties"; "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180–200 at 194. See also Sophie Sexon, "Gender-Querying Christ's Wounds: A Non-Binary Interpretation of Christ's Body in Late Medieval Imagery," in *Trans and Gender-queer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 133–53.

notions of conception and pregnancy. The predominant theory of generation held that a fetus develops from uterine blood, with semen contributing form or animating essence to this material.[26] Here, however, it is Muldumarec who bleeds at the moment when Yonec is first conceptualized, if not literally conceived, as they ascertain the lady's pregnancy before she is aware of it herself (327–32).

This scene of "conception" has a parallel in a birthlike image later in the narrative, when the lady follows Muldumarec's bloody trail through a hill:

> En cele hoge ot une entree,
> De cel sanc fu tute arusee
> Ne pot nent avant aler.
> Dunc quidot ele bien saver
> Que sis amis entré i seit;
> Dedenz se met en grant espleit. (347–53)
>
> (There was an entry into this hill
> All wet with the blood;
> she could go no farther.
> Then she thought she was quite sure
> that her beloved had gone in there;
> She went inside in great haste.)

Yonec is not the only medieval text that requires a character to cross an apparently solid boundary in order to access a supernatural realm, but the emphasis on Muldumarec's blood here is striking.[27] In addition to marking Muldumarec's journey, this blood produces a shift in the lady's perspective and perhaps even a physical reshaping of the formerly untraversable hill. Compared to that of the bedchamber, the blood here is arguably more aligned with the masculine side of McCracken's dichotomy due to the changes that it enacts on the world, but these

[26] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 158–61; Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 117–30.

[27] On the eventual transformation of Muldumarec's realm from a supernatural space to a more realistic abbey, see Seeta Chaganti, "The Space of Epistemology in Marie de France's 'Yonec,'" *Romance Studies* 28, no. 2 (2010): 71–83 at 78–79, doi.org/10.1179/026399010X12645114972170; Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 120–24.

changes directly impact only the lady; that is, they are "local and specific" in a way that McCracken associates with women's blood.[28]

My goal in pointing out these ambiguities is not to definitively identify Muldumarec's blood as "masculine" or "feminine," but to highlight its persistent capacity to blur such distinctions. These passages suggest that Muldumarec is not simply a man who assumes a woman's appearance as a disguise; instead, their shifting, bleeding body poses a more fundamental resistance to binary categorization. In fact, it is notably Muldumarec who dies in the process of bringing Yonec into the world, a detail that enhances their association with childbirth and highlights the poem's equivocal view of reproduction.

Scholars have often grappled with how *Yonec* seems to privilege "patrilineal" descent at the expense of the lady, whom the poem risks casting as an unindividuated vehicle of the narrative.[29] I do not wish to further marginalize her by exploring the possibility of Muldumarec participating in this pregnancy; rather, I argue that their gender fluidity undermines the notion of patrilineality entirely. Indeed, Muldumarec's death may reflect the poet's inability to imagine how they would fulfill a fatherly role in this hierarchical aristocratic society, necessitating that Yonec be raised by the lady's husband. Furthermore, these associations with pregnancy augment previous scholars' arguments about the lady achieving autonomy through verbal self-expression and sexual relations beyond her unhappy marriage.[30] For instance, Kimberly Tate Anderson claims that the lady plays an active part in the child's conception due to her "imaginative generation of her lover," in contrast to the Aristotelian view of women as the receptive or passive partners during conception.[31] Muldumarec's bleeding poses a complementary challenge to these active/passive binaries, suggesting their insufficiency for describing the roles of either parent.

[28] McCracken, *Curse of Eve*, 10.

[29] For instance, the prologue emphasizes the link between Muldumarec and Yonec by placing their names in successive rhyming positions, while only acknowledging the lady briefly (5–10).

[30] Freeman argues that the prologue underscores the lady's agency in choosing her own lover; "Changing Figure of the Male," 255.

[31] Intriguingly, Anderson suggests that the lady is "both mother and father of Yonec," inviting further readings of the lady as nonbinary or genderqueer; "Yonec's Mother," 15.

Ultimately, *Yonec* depicts reproduction as a mode of resisting confining patriarchal structures: where seven years of conventional marriage have failed to produce heirs, the lady's relationship with a genderfluid hawk-knight succeeds. Marie's *lai* thus offers an example of what Blake Gutt has called "transgender genealogy," in which characters' bodily transformations enable, rather than impede, the noble lineage that is a central concern of the chivalric genre.[32] Yet in *Yonec*, these transformations also include movement across species lines, a matter to which I will turn in the next section.

De (tr)anima: Tranimacies and the Nonhuman Soul

In premodern thought, nonbinary figures like Muldumarec often served as, in Leah DeVun's terms, "a concentrated site of meaning where arguments about sex, gender, sexuality, animality, religiosity, and the nature of life on earth all played out."[33] DeVun has shown that many medieval scholars considered the binary sex model to be characteristic of humanity; conversely, writers aligned individuals who deviated from this norm with nonhuman animals, using the concept of "hermaphroditism" to strengthen not only the human/nonhuman boundary, but also hierarchies of race, gender, and class.[34] Here, I will argue that *Yonec* both echoes and subverts these patterns; in particular, Muldumarec's species mutability reinforces both their gender fluidity and their stable class position.[35] I will also

[32] Gutt uses this phrase to describe Blanchandin/e in *Tristan de Nanteuil*, who becomes "mother to one child, and father to another"; "Transgender Genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil*," *Exemplaria* 30, no. 2 (2018): 129–46, doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2018.1453652.

[33] DeVun, *Shape of Sex*, 5.

[34] DeVun, *Shape of Sex*, esp. 40–101. As DeVun acknowledges, some theologians espoused alternative views of both primal and resurrected humans as sexually undifferentiated (16–39). However, the spread of Aristotelian texts and translations bolstered the notion of human sex as a strict binary in the later thirteenth century (102–33).

[35] Emma Campbell's view of Muldumarec's hawk form differs slightly from my own: she argues that Marie "identifies humanity with courtly attributes," and that that Muldumarec displays "a nobility that surpasses outward appearance." I agree with Campbell's point about humanity being a "process" to which characters in the *lais* have unequal access. However, given the emphasis in trans theory on the actual state of the body, I approach Muldumarec not as a knight whose avian appearance conceals their humanity, but as a character whose hawk and human forms each play a role in

consider the theological ramifications of Muldumarec taking the Eucharist, which medieval scholars would likely not have seen as legitimizing or even legitimate, given that nonhuman animals could not participate in this ritual due to their lack of a rational soul.

When Muldumarec first transforms into a human, they simultaneously identify as a hawk and a member of the aristocracy:

> "Dame," fet il, "n'eiez poür!
> Gentil oisel ad en ostur;
> Si li segrei sunt oscur,
> Gardez ke seiez a seür,
> Si fetes de mei vostre ami!" (121–25)
>
> ("Lady," he said, "do not be afraid!
> In the goshawk you have a noble bird;
> even if its secrets are obscure,
> see that you are safe,
> and make me your beloved!")

By presenting themselves as a "gentil oisel," Muldumarec gestures toward a tradition of associating these enormous raptors with the highest echelons of society—a tradition preserved in their modern scientific name, *Accipiter gentilis*. This connection between the Eurasian goshawk and the upper classes was well-established by the twelfth century, with most English kings favoring goshawks and sparrowhawks for their leisure activities.[36] The writers of literary and scholarly texts tended to echo Muldumarec by ascribing noble qualities to these species; thus Albertus Magnus related the goshawk's violent behavior to upper-class characteristics: "quando bene nobiles sunt, praedam non propter escam, sed ex gloria accipiunt et in tirannide delectantur" (since they are quite noble, they capture prey not for food but rather out of a sense of glory and because they delight in tyranny).[37] *Yonec* therefore reflects a tendency

constructing their class identity. See "Political Animals: Human/Animal Life in *Bisclavret* and *Yonec*," *Exemplaria* 25, no. 2 (2013): 95–109 at 104–6, doi.org/10.1179/1041257313Z.00000000027.

[36] Goshawks were generally more esteemed and more expensive. See Robin S. Oggins, *The Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 15–16.

[37] Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI, nach der Cölner Urschrift*, ed. Hermann Stadler (Münster: Aschendorff, 1916–20), vol. 2, 23.1.2, n. 18, p. 1439. Translation from *Albertus Magnus, On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, trans. Kenneth

that scholars have identified in many of the texts attributed to Marie de France: namely, these texts depict (and often advocate for) a stable class system by associating the nobility with animals that are stronger, larger, wilder, and/or more highly valued.[38] In Marie's poetry, animalization is not consistently negative, but varies in connotation depending on the type of animal to which one is compared.

Muldumarec's avian form also bears gendered associations that resonate with their flexible presentation. In the past, some scholars have read the *ostur* as decidedly masculine; for instance, June Hall McCash claims that "the goshawk, because of its size, was a bird associated almost always with men, and was hence considered the nobler of the two, while women tended to hunt with the smaller sparrowhawk."[39] However, although later texts such as *Le Ménagier de Paris* (1393) and *The Boke of St. Albans* (1486) do indicate that women should hunt with smaller birds, there is less evidence to support this gendered distinction in the twelfth century.[40] Indeed, Robin S. Oggins finds that "household records of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century queens mention only larger birds," leading him to conclude that the primary determinant of species choice was social status.[41] More disruptive still to straightforward equations of masculinity with power is the fact that *ostur*, like the names of most raptors in this period, referred to the female of the species, which was larger, more powerful, and more desirable in hawking communities.[42]

To summarize, then, even before Muldumarec takes on a woman's appearance, they defy the rigid binaries of sex and gender that distinguished humans from other species by presenting as an animal that interacted with both men and women, which they identify using a term

F. Kitchell, Jr. and Irven Michael Resnick (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 2:1554.

[38] See, e.g., Joyce E. Salisbury's reading of Marie's beast fables: *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 110–13.

[39] June Hall McCash, "The Hawk-Lover in Marie de France's *Yonec*," *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1991): 67–75 at 71.

[40] Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier, eds., *Le Menagier de Paris* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 151; Dame Juliana Berners, *English Hawking and Hunting in the Boke of St. Albans: A Facsimile Edition of Sigs. a2-f8 of the Boke of St. Albans (1486)*, ed. Rachel Hands (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), d3v–d4r.

[41] Oggins, *Kings and Their Hawks*, 118–19.

[42] Petrosillo, *Hawking Women*, 13, 93.

that might be genderless or feminine. The convergence of gender fluidity and class stability in Muldumarec's hawk form provocatively suggests that nobility might be dissociated from—or perhaps even at odds with—strict gender norms. As it complicates the conventional hierarchies of chivalric literature, this scene therefore also resonates with an intersectional, multispecies branch of trans theory exemplified by the work of Mel Y. Chen, who has described contemporary biopolitics as founded on "animacy hierarchies" that situate "human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority."[43] Chen's scholarship has informed a turn toward "a specifically transgender informed and conceptually trans* shaped commentary on the 'animal turn' in humanities," which theorists often describe using neologisms such as "tranimalities" and "tranimacies."[44]

Placing these approaches in conversation with *Yonec* yields insights in both directions. For example, Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein draw attention to "the expansive world of possibility opened up by nonanthropocentric perspectives," asking scholars to consider not only the violence through which normative human standards are maintained, but also the liberatory potential of aligning trans and nonhuman exper-iences.[45] This duality is apparent throughout *Yonec*; thus Muldumarec's physical transformations empower them in their pursuit of love and lineage, although their resistance to conventional categorization also condemns them to suffering and death.

The tension between vulnerability and liberation is also relevant to a third category of blood in this *lai*: the blood of Christ. Chen has suggested that "the language of transsubstantiation might provide an alternative way to understand how bodies of all sorts undergo regimes of regulation, and also how they resist those regimes."[46] Despite Chen's emphasis on "substance," however, Colby Gordon observes that Chen's view of transubstantiation is often "troublingly figurative," an abstraction of the material exchanges between human and nonhuman that are bound

[43] Chen, *Animacies*, 13.

[44] "Tranimacies" is generally used more broadly to include plant life and inorganic materials. See Steinbock, Szczygielska, and Wagner, "Thinking Linking," 1.

[45] Hayward and Weinstein, "Tranimalities," 201.

[46] Chen, *Animacies*, 154.

up in transitioning.[47] *Yonec* offers an opportunity to intervene in this discussion by linking "tranimacies" to transubstantiation in a literal sense. In theological terms, the most transgressive aspect of this poem is neither its portrayal of marital infidelity nor its nonbinary character, but its depiction of a hawk receiving the Eucharist. Medieval philosophers typically claimed that a nonhuman animal's essence died with its body; only humans had a rational soul which remained uncorrupted by its time on earth and persisted after death, rendering nonhumans ineligible for salvation.[48] Consequently, a hawk should not be able to take part in this sacramental ritual, as Peggy McCracken observes; certainly, its consumption of the body and blood of Christ should not be taken as a reliable sign of virtue.[49]

However, from a different and less orthodox perspective, this scene may also legitimize Muldumarec's transformations. Twelfth-century theologians held a variety of opinions on the mechanics of what the Fourth Lateran Council would term "transubstantiation" in 1215, but concurred on the actual presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, which nonetheless retained the appearance, texture, and flavor of bread and wine.[50] Defined by the interaction of earthly and spiritual

[47] Colby Gordon, "Abortive Hedgehogs: Prodigies and Trans Animality in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 206–26 at 208, doi.org/10.1353/jem.2019.0044.

[48] Karl Steel explores this view of the rational soul in *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), esp. chapters 1 and 3.

[49] Peggy McCracken, "Translation and Animals in Marie de France's *Lais*," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 46, no. 3 (2009): 206–18 at 213, doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.46.3.206.

Already a problem for Augustine and the eleventh-century theologian Berengar of Tours, who disputed the Eucharistic Presence by sarcastically asking whether a mouse could consume Christ, the question of animals eating the Host would be more systematically treated in the thirteenth century by scholars such as Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure; these later writers argued that animals receive only the external form of the Eucharist, being unable to detect the presence of Christ therein. See Gary Macy, "Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 365–98 at 378–90; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 67.

[50] Macy, "Theology of the Eucharist," 372–75.

realities, this conveniently prefixed phenomenon therefore defies binaries—or as Stephen Nichols puts it, "the mystery of the Eucharist itself subsumes alterity."[51] Christ's presence in this ritual is both real and undetectable via the senses, both spiritually elevating for humans and incomprehensible to them. Thus even as medieval doctrine denied salvation to nonhuman species, the Eucharist naturalized the blurring of categories, revealing the potential for mutability in the natural order. Put differently, gender variance appears both plausible and permissible compared to Christ's (miraculous) assumption of mortal flesh and the (heretical, but implied) salvation of a bird. In fact, given that medieval writers often used gender nonconformity to "indicat[e] proximity to, rather than distance from, the divine," Muldumarec's flexible gender presentation may actually enhance their claim to virtue.[52]

Frequently depicted as boundary creatures that move freely among biomes and mimic human behavior, birds manifest what Michael Warren calls "an in-betweenness apparent in their very substance."[53] As *Yonec*'s nonbinary hawk-knight demonstrates, the "in-betweenness" of birds also encouraged medieval writers to contemplate other categories, from social rank to the limits of rationality. In this article, I have argued that this poem presents Muldumarec's bleeding body as ambiguously gendered and aligned with pregnancy. I have also considered their changing position within intertwined systems of gender, species, and class; indeed, medieval poems like *Yonec* highlight the importance of considering how racial, socioeconomic, and gender categories have shifted and shaped each other over time.[54] Finally, I have shown that the Eucharist scene potentially

[51] Nichols argues that the Eucharist "naturalizes the transgressive nature of the knight's shapeshifting" with respect to gender, a point that is equally applicable to Muldumarec's species variance; "Deflections of the Body," 38.

[52] Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, "Introduction," in Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*, 11–40 at 17.

[53] Michael J. Warren, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 13.

[54] Today, trans people often have very different experiences depending on their access to wealth and what Susan Stryker calls "spectacular whiteness." Emblematic of the latter is Christine Jorgensen's (1926–89) widely publicized transition, which Stryker describes as "part of the machinery of [American] colonization"; "*We Who Are Sexy:* Christine Jorgensen's Transsexual Whiteness in the Postcolonial Philippines," *Social Semiotics* 19, no. 1 (2009): 79–91 at 88, doi.org/10.1080/10350330802655551. See

authorizes all of Muldumarec's mutations, despite its fundamental heterodoxy. Fully human and fully hawk, Muldumarec participates in a ritual premised on transformation, multiplicity, and the irreducibility of outward appearance to underlying truth—ideas as essential to medieval theology as they are to trans existence.

further C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 139–75.