
Editor's Introduction

Gender does not equal genitals

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The lived experience of intersex persons today – that is, individuals that are born ‘with genital, genetic, or hormonal characteristics that some people find confusing’ (Morland, 2014, 111) – bears witness, often painful and distressing, to the ways that different cultures figure the relationship between genitals and gender. Since the second half of the twentieth century, gender in the West has typically been understood to refer to either masculinity or femininity, depending on the classification of bodies as either male or female on the basis of their genitalia. From the moment it is born, the infant is caught up in its culture’s stories of gender. The first question that parents ask – ‘Is it a boy or is it a girl?’ (Chase, [1998] 2006, 300) – presupposes that gender is rigidly dimorphic, a presupposition that depends in turn on genitalia that look recognizably male or female. It hardly needs to be repeated that the narrative of dimorphic gender, together with its corollary that gender = genitals, has had, and continues to have, a powerful impact on intersex persons, some of whom have undergone traumatic surgery as children because of physicians’ paradoxical insistence that female and male are ‘the only “natural” options’ (Kessler, 1990, 4).

In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe, too, French and Italian surgeons claimed the authority to surgically ‘correct’ bodies with atypical



genitalia (DeVun, 2015), anticipating the ‘infant surgical protocols’ for the treatment of intersex developed by the US-based, twentieth-century psychologist John Money (Morland, 2015, 69). Although there is no evidence that medieval surgeons ever performed such corrections, the effect on the identity of those with bodies that did not conform to their culture’s received story of gender is not hard to imagine. The assumption, in the past as now, is that there is something wrong with the intersex body, and that it needs to be modified in order to be made ‘normal.’ But intersex bodies don’t need fixing; the cultural narrative does. Each essay here explores how specific historical and cultural contexts within the premodern period shaped the understanding of the intersex body in the past. Stories about intersex in history provide vital resources for thinking about intersex in the present, shaking us out of our assumptions and making possible new stories about genitals and gender.

Medieval intersex persons were called either hermaphrodites – now an offensive term, because of its associations with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century medical diagnoses and sexual fetishes – or *androgyni* (men-women): persons having both male and female characteristics. Our modern category intersex – coined in 1915 by the zoologist Richard Goldschmidt to describe moths with atypical sex characteristics – does not map straightforwardly onto its premodern avatars (Roman, 2019). For one thing, the definition of intersex today is not only the possession of ‘ambiguous’ genitalia, since intersex also encompasses genetic and hormonal variations that are not visible on the surface of the body (Morland, 2014, 111), and some sex anatomy variations do not show up until later in life.

But the past is not a completely foreign country. Dipesh Chakrabarty makes the case that

humans from any other period and region [. . .] are always in some sense our contemporaries: that would have to be the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us. Thus the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself. [. . .] [T]he writing of medieval history for Europe depends on this assumed contemporaneity of the medieval, or what is the same thing, the non-contemporaneity of the present with itself. (Chakrabarty, 2000, 109)

We understand humans in the past because in any era a plurality of times – and a plurality of stories about what it means to be human and to have a gender – co-exist. The present is not identical with itself: it is overwritten with stories from elsewhere that affirm chronological continuity even as they disrupt it. And we can flip this, as Geraldine Heng does in relation to the category of race: ‘the past can also be nonidentical to itself, inhabited too by that which was out of its time – marked by modernities that estrange medieval time in ways that render medieval practices legible in modern terms’ (Heng, 2018, 22).

To draw attention to those temporal (mis)identifications, to the presence of the past in the now and of the now in the past, is productive insofar as it makes us think differently about the here and now of intersex. In her essay in this issue, M.W. Bychowski makes a point of using both the medieval and modern words for intersex persons, reserving ‘hermaphrodite’ to describe the people that inhabit the Isle of Hermaphroditus in the Middle English text of the *Book of John Mandeville*, and using ‘intersex’ for her description of those peoples. The goal of this distinction, she explains, ‘is to highlight the conceptual constructedness of a culture used to seeing sex and gender in binary terms as well as to acknowledge how such histories are inextricable from the stories of those peoples who lived in their wake.’ We would be wrong to label as anachronistic the critical move that uses a modern term to describe people in the past who would never have been described that way at the time. The interplay between past and present can furnish ways of thinking otherwise about intersex, other, that is, than the dominant medical and social models that see genitals determining gender, or the current assumption that we know what intersex looks like (Morland, this issue), that we ‘recognize’ the intersex body. Despite the fact that the intersex person today and the medieval hermaphrodite have historically different boundaries, the essays here invite readers to engage with historicist frameworks in order to keep open the question of the potential continuities between past and present bodies, genders, and sexualities.

The locus classicus of the origin of hermaphroditism is Ovid’s tale of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus in Book 4, ll. 285–388, of the *Metamorphoses* (8 BCE). It is worth looking at in detail because Ovid’s version was very influential throughout the premodern period (Clark et al., 2011; DeVun, 2008; Long, 2006), and still reverberates in modern understandings of intersex, as the photograph by Arthur Tress that appears on the cover image of this issue attests. It also yields some unexpected lessons for what Morland in this issue calls ‘the postsurgical world.’

In the tale, the naiad Salmacis aggressively propositions the beautiful youth Hermaphroditus, begging him for kisses and making as if to put her hands on his neck; blushing, he begs her to stop; she leaves but conceals herself; thinking he is now alone, Hermaphroditus strips in order to enter her pool; she advances on him, and he jumps into the water to escape her; she dives in after him, and as he fights her off she weaves herself around his body, praying to the gods that ‘the day never comes when the two of us here shall be riven asunder’ [istum / nulla dies a me nec me deducat ab isto] (Ovid, 2004, 149; Anderson, 1998, 116). The gods grant her prayer: ‘[t]he bodies of boy and girl / were merged and melded in one’ [‘mixta duorum corporum iunguntur’] (Ovid, 2004, 149; Anderson, 1998, 116). In revenge, Hermaphroditus prays to his parents that ‘whoever enters this pool as a man, let him weaken as soon / as he touches the water, and always emerge with his manhood diminished’ [‘quisquis in hos fontes vir venerit, exeat inde / semivir et tactis subito mollescat in undis’] (Ovid, 2004, 150; Anderson



1998, 116). They grant the wish of their double-formed [*biformis*] son, ‘infecting the pool with a neutering tincture’ [*incerto fontem medicamine tinxit*] (Ovid, 2004, 150; Anderson, 1998, 117).

It is worth noting that ‘*semivir*’ [*half-man*] usually refers to semihuman monsters like centaurs, or to eunuchs, or to ‘unmanly males,’ which together with the reference to the sissifying of the body [*mollescat*] shows that what is at stake for Hermaphroditus in his newly hybrid form is the threat of that hybridity both to his humanity – he has become a monster – and his masculinity. The understanding of hermaphrodites as monsters or prodigies in nature is one that persists in the premodern period (Rubin, 1994, 102). But the use of ‘*incerto*’ [*uncertain, doubtful*], used by the Roman historian Livy to refer to a baby whose sex is hard to discern (Anderson, 1998, 455), offers a different model of gender, albeit one that Hermaphroditus’s prayer intends negatively; it implies that, after entering the pool, a person’s sex cannot be inferred from their appearance. In other words, it suggests a body of indeterminate sex, presenting a spectrum of gendered possibilities.

Further details in Ovid’s version imply a critique of sex and gender dimorphism (Zajko, 2009). Hermaphroditus appears androgynous *before* he enters Salmacis’s pool, in that he looks like both his father Hermes and his mother Aphrodite [*facies, in qua materque paterque cognosci possent*] (Ovid, 2004, 145; Anderson, 1998, 114). It’s as if he were already an androgyne before Salmacis cleaves her body to his, as if she releases some possibility that is already within him, like the imago of a butterfly within a chrysalis, as if his metamorphosis is not a change into a new state but rather suggests the potential of all humans to have an androgynous pre-state. Moreover, the melded body of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus has a doubled form [*forma duplex*] that ‘couldn’t be fairly / described as male or as female’ [*nec femina dici / nec puer ut possit*]; rather, it is ‘neither and both’ [*nec utrumque et utrumque*] (Ovid, 2004, 149; Anderson, 1998, 116). This body is a conundrum: it is not recognizably of either sex, and yet it has both male and female genitalia. Ovid’s tale gets at the complexity of the intersex body and the problematic status of the cultural narratives of gender that seek (and fail) to render it intelligible, narratives of the simultaneous ‘bothness’ and ‘neitherness’ of hybridity (DeVun, 2008, 216–17) that we still live with. Despite the judgment at the end of Ovid’s tale that a man’s possession of female genitals is shameful, the morphological contradictions of Hermaphroditus’s body are allowed to remain.

According to the Intersex Society of North America, about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 infants are born in the USA today with such noticeably atypical genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation has to be called in (Intersex Society of North America, 2008). But intersex is a complex phenomenon: what counts as intersex? how small does a penis have to be to be not clearly male? Some sex anatomy variations do not show up until later in life, and some are chromosomal and do not result in visible sexual ambiguity. These variations,

which are all precisely defined in medical terms, also differ for different populations, due to genetic causes. For example, in the town of Las Salinas in the Dominican Republic the incidence of one type of intersex trait is much higher than in other populations (Mosley, 2015). Also noteworthy is the fact that once medical intervention through surgery became possible, intersex became the subject of a raging debate over the ethics of what Morland describes as ‘intimate violations’ of bodily integrity (Morland, 2008). Intersex today is highly medicalized, but it is also a lived experience, and for some intersex persons, a deeply traumatic one. We have no access to the lived experience of hermaphrodites in the Middle Ages; there is no medieval memoir like that of the nineteenth-century intersex person Herculine Barbin (Barbin, 1980).

By contrast, the late antique and premodern hermaphrodite, as a figure conjoining masculine and feminine genitalia and thus considered either of indeterminate or double sexuality, did considerable cultural work. It served as a marker of the unstable borders between categories: human/animal, human/monster, Christian/Jew, Christian/Muslim, European/other (Rubin, 1994). Hermaphrodites were sometimes grouped with other bodies considered monstrous or racially other: the twelfth-century bishop and chronicler Otto of Freising placed them with giants, women, dwarves, the lame and the weak, the excessively fat or thin, and Ethiopians, with their ‘affliction of colour so disagreeable’ (Metzler, 2006, 57). Hermaphroditism was also associated with heresy. One of the vices in Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* proclaims: ‘I am called Discord, and my other name is Heresy. The God I have is variable, now lesser, now greater, now double, now single’ (Prudentius, 2006, 329). Just as the figure of the hermaphrodite challenges sexual dimorphism, so heresy, with its God that is both single and double (analogous to the double sex of the hermaphrodite), disrupts the unified body of the church, and makes a mockery of God’s divine authority. Conversely, to heretics was ascribed the view that the orthodox church was double-sexed. The anti-Lollard writers of the late fourteenth-century *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* declared that ‘men of duple estate,’ that is, men who served in both temporal and spiritual roles (a king that is also a bishop, for example), should be known as ‘hermafrodita or ambidexter’ (Hudson, 1978, 26). In John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* (1159), the corrupting power of the court is compared to the ‘infamous fountain of Salmacis’ in Ovid’s tale of Hermaphroditus, capable of transforming the courtier into a hermaphrodite, ‘who, by a sort of foolish error of nature, exhibits the likeness of both sexes, yet retains the true qualities of neither of them’ (John of Salisbury, 1990, 90–1). And from the thirteenth century on, in alchemical texts, the hermaphrodite represented the so-called philosopher’s stone, which was reputed to transmute base materials into gold, uniting male and female principles (DeVun, 2008, 198–203). Hermaphroditism also posed a sodomitical threat: in Chapter 138 of his *Verbum abbreviatum* (c. 1187), entitled ‘De vitio sodomitico’ [‘Of the sodomitical vice’], the Parisian theologian Peter the



Chanter warned that a hermaphrodite should only use one of her or his sexual organs to avoid the sin of sodomy (Peter the Chanter, 1855, col. 334). In premodern law, the necessity to assign a hermaphrodite to a sex was determined discursively: in ancient Roman law, an individual's sex had 'a bearing on inheritance rights'; in medieval Islam, if the hermaphroditic child did not appear unequivocally male or female by puberty, it threatened *fitna*, social disruption and thus religious observance; in medieval Christianity, hermaphrodites presented a problem to the legitimacy of marriages (Green, 2013, 354). In the Islamic tradition, surgery was contemplated: the treatment for both male and female hermaphrodites was for the cutting off of whatever parts were 'in excess' (Green, 2013, 355).

The Middle Ages does not have a concept of gender as a contingent and variable cultural construct that is separate from the biological body (femininity and masculinity). But it does have a concept of sexual difference (male/female) and – in some medieval vernaculars – of grammatical gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Yet gender is always, as I've been arguing, an effect of language: of the institution of norms through powerful cultural narratives. Stories about gender traverse all the essays here, showing a range of thinking about the intersex body and its supposed perfection and imperfection, from theology to medicine to pronoun use, and to the effects of poets writing in two medieval vernaculars. What we learn from reading intersex in the past is that atypical genitals in history are not predominantly seen through a medical lens, but from a number of interdisciplinary purviews (Christian theology, modes of literary interpretation, cartography) that offer surprising and productive interpretations of intersex as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon.

In her contribution, Leah DeVun shows how premodern Christian theology addresses the conundrum of sex and gender when it considers the status of the body at the beginning and end of Christian time. What is at stake for premodern theologians is the question of when the body became sexually differentiated: were Adam and Eve male and female in Paradise or only after the fall? And what happened to the body when it was resurrected: would it keep its genitals, or would sexual difference and 'errors' in nature be reconciled? For some late antique thinkers, Adam was a 'primal androgyne': that is, he did not have a doubled sex like Ovid's Hermaphroditus, but was like an angel, sexually undifferentiated. Binary sex was a consequence of the fall. Augustine, however, held that Adam and Eve *were* sexually differentiated in Paradise. However, they did not experience lust. For Augustine, lust was a consequence of the fall. Yet because Augustine referred to the state of the 'primal androgyne' as *hermaphroditus*, even as he rejected this theory, he raised the possibility that hermaphrodites might be considered perfect creatures, though admittedly only insofar as they were sexually undifferentiated.

Less well known, DeVun claims, is the vigorous debate over what form human bodies would take at the resurrection. Would they rise without genitals,

like the ‘primal androgyne’? By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most theologians accepted that the body would return with the genitals it had had in life. Not so the hermaphroditic body. Thinkers believed that the afterlife would be denied to those with atypical genitalia, and that at the resurrection God would perform a kind of corrective surgery on their ‘defective’ bodies, so that they would be made ‘decisively male or female’ (DeVun, in this issue). Assumptions about the humanity of intersex persons (Morland, 2015, 90) have a long history. Yet within the premodern Christian tradition positive representations of intersex anatomies – for example, the figuration of Christ as hermaphroditic in alchemical texts – continued to exercise the imagination, suggesting that such anatomies were considered part of humanity and not other to it. If the body of doubled or indeterminate sex is viewed in western intellectual history as an affront to nature that in the final reckoning does not count as human, this is also contradicted by the premodern imaginings of intersex for figuring the perfect union of opposites.

Previous forms of the language and literary genres that are no longer in vogue further extend the possibilities for thinking differently about intersex bodies today, and also show that thinking about intersex possibilities can release new meanings in literary texts. The thirteenth-century French courtly poem the *Roman de la Rose* is often touted as an allegory of ‘natural’ heterosexual desire. But readers are invited, David Rollo argues, to move between literal and figurative registers, without settling on either, a mode of reading he calls ‘hermaphroditic hermeneutics’ (Rollo, in this issue). The poem achieves this by exploiting the possibilities of grammatical gender, no longer a feature of modern English but a feature of some premodern European vernaculars, including Old French. In personification allegory, abstract qualities are bodied forth as sexed persons. Bel Acueil (Warm Welcome), for example, takes the form of a young man because his name is grammatically masculine. He is literally a man, but he also figuratively represents a woman: the rose that the Lover adores and is restlessly searching for. His/her ambiguous gender is further reinforced by an aural pun: Bel Acueil is ‘bel a coilles / belle a coilles’ [‘a handsome guy with balls / a lovely woman with balls’]. The *Roman* as a whole is fascinated by the possibility that the figurative sense subtends the literal: should one use a literal word that risks offending nice readers (‘coilles’) or a figurative one (Gaunt, 1998, 73–4; Rollo, 2011, 179–190)? While figurative language enables a great deal of this courtly poem’s pleasurable obscenity (Gaunt, 2006, 95), hermaphroditic hermeneutics – in its interplay between the literal and figurative registers of the sexed body – offers much more than obscenity: it’s a mode of interpretation that not only invites and takes pleasure in the recognition of intersex anatomies, but also refuses to see them as one thing or another.

If we read the poem’s allegorical depiction of sex between Amant and the body he enjoys (Bel Acueil/the rose) straight, we are reading figuratively (a man having sex with a woman). If we read it as a same-sex act, then we are reading



literally. But we can do both. We can read literally and figuratively at the same time. The *Roman* is both hetero- and homoerotic, and it is not one or the other. Like Ovid's Hermaphroditus, the poem's depiction of the sexed body and its genders is 'neither and both' ['nec utrumque et utrumque']. If medieval hermeneutics typically presupposes an unveiling of the truth – the exposure, so to speak, of the genitals of the textual body – then a hermaphroditic hermeneutics asks that we attend to the surface of a text in which there is no unveiling of a final truth but only a pleasurable shuttling back and forth between the literal and the figurative, a shuttling moreover that leads to no transcendent meaning but which is an end in itself.

Like DeVun, M.W. Bychowski considers the presentation of non-binary bodies in Christian times and places, not in the high intellectual tradition but in the popular imaginary of maps and fantastic travel narratives. In the fourteenth-century *Book of John Mandeville* and the Hereford *mappa mundi*, bodies with combined male and female genitalia are placed on the margins and outside Christian history, expelled from the sacred spaces and temporalities of pilgrimage and premodern journeying across the world. But Bychowski identifies a dynamic in both the *Book* and the map that shifts our understanding of the gaze on the intersex body today: what she calls 'boundary-lust.' She derives this term from the etymology of Herm-aphroditus, whose name means a conjoining of the god of boundaries (Hermes) and the goddess of lust (Aphrodite). Although non-normate bodies find themselves placed in these texts on the geographical and temporal margins of the world and of sacred history, as if to mark the border between what is considered a 'natural' body and what is not, and thus setting the scene for their fetishization, medicalization, and abjection today (and, I might add, setting the scene for the early modern and modern colonialist and imperialist assertion of dominion as much over those bodies as over territories), those bodies are also objects of desire. Boundary-lust means a desire for the margins inhabited by non-normate bodies, but not necessarily in order to gawk at them or fetishize them. Rather, it names an active noticing of those bodies. Even though those bodies are placed in the margins, they are not invisible. They represent gender diversity as an attraction that appears to be missing in the here and now of what it means to be human.

Yet, as Bychowski observes, intersex is a naturally-occurring phenomenon that is about as common in the population as red-headedness. Intersex is at the center, not the margins, of the here and now. While this marginalization is a burden that intersex persons today must still bear, what intersex studies can learn from the dynamic of boundary-lust in texts like Mandeville's *Book* and medieval *mappae mundi* is that the normate man, observing a non-binary body in the *Book*, and describing it with detachment for his readers, does not securely inhabit the center of the world or the time of the present, but is haunted by the meanings of that non-binary body, which serves not as his other but as the very constituent of his own meaning as 'natural.' As Bychowski argues, 'Realizing

that intersex may already cut across binary times and places disorients claims over what genders exist when and where.’ This realization teaches us that we do not know what intersex means, in the past or now.

An earlier English travel narrative, the Old English poem *The Wonders of the East* (c. 1000), reveals another way in which intersex in history cuts across ‘binary times and places.’ The extraordinary body of the human-animal hybrid known as the Donestre in *The Wonders of the East* appears to be of illegible gender, but Amanda Lehr argues that it can be read as intersex. The Donestre is a cannibal. In consuming humans of both sexes it takes on their humoral and humorally-gendered characteristics. Rather than seeing the Donestre as a monstrous figure that represents the Self consuming the Other, Lehr argues that by containing within itself the bodies of everyone it has eaten, it becomes a different hybrid being: an amalgam of sexes and genders that confuses the boundaries of the dimorphic body, which it attempts to mitigate by weeping, shedding the bodily excess it has consumed as tears. Lehr’s essay also enables a reading of other Anglo-Saxon cannibal texts, such as *Beowulf*. Her claim that ‘[w]hat appears to be a biological curiosity [the Donestre] produces a spiritual conundrum: cannibalism and intersexuality are entwined symptoms of a theological question about the relationship between body and soul(s)’ can be extended: the Donestre is also a set of possibilities about what it means to be human.

Where Rollo dealt with the interplay between literal and figurative language, Jonathan Hsy attends to the interplay between the language systems of French and English to talk about the relationship between the lived experience of inhabiting an embodied gender and the deployment of ‘bivernacularity’ by authors working across two vernacular languages, which was the experience of many people in premodern, multilingual England and France. Hsy’s essay considers how poetry by the English poet John Gower, who sometimes wrote in French, and the French poet Charles d’Orléans, who sometimes wrote in English, expresses a sense of ‘embodied entrapment,’ what the queer, transgender activist Alexandre Baril calls ‘wrong-bodiedness.’ Hsy follows Baril in positing an analogy between a hybrid or doubled or hermaphroditic linguistic identity and a hybrid or doubled or hermaphroditic gender identity. Hsy focuses closely on the intimate relation between gender and language, as opposed to that between gender and genitals, an opposition that Morland describes as ‘gender as determined by genital appearance and gender as an effect of language’ (Morland, 2014, 112), where language is understood in Foucauldian terms as the institutional discourses (including practices) that draw on power and knowledge to establish social norms. Although Hsy is thinking more of a trans framework for understanding Gower’s and Charles d’Orléans’s ‘embodied entrapment’ (since intersex does not draw on the rhetoric of somatic entrapment), his argument about the traversing of ‘two concurrent gender paradigms in the Middle Ages’ – for example, Gower’s hermaphroditic personifications



have both masculine and feminine gender attributes – is relevant to refiguring gender and intersex in the present. In any case, intersex and trans were not as rigidly separated then as today (Whittington, this issue).

By showing us that poets writing in two vernaculars readily present their characters as inhabiting two linguistic and literal genders, Hsy teaches us that gender was not as rigid a category in the premodern as it sometimes seems to be now. If ‘any traversal of languages entails a conceptual and geographical repositioning’ (Hsy, this issue), then by looking at intersex historically, we reorient ourselves towards the present differently. Neither Gower nor Charles d’Orléans are failing to understand how gender works in different languages; rather, their practice shows ‘an agile and adaptive skill,’ transforming ‘social structures from the inside out’ (Hsy, this issue). Following Claudio Galderisi, Hsy argues that all writing in a literary language involves an ‘artificial or alien mode of communication.’ If Gower and Charles are outsiders in both tongues, then inhabiting gender is also – or can be made to seem like – an artificial or alien mode of communication: a productive disrupting of the naturalness of gender. In premodern multilingual writing, gender does not equal genitals; gender is not a constraint on the identity of writing or subjects. Nor does it have to be today.

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