

Theologizing Gender in the *Rothschild Canticles*¹

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Introduction

THE SONG OF SONGS, arguably the most bodily and sexual book of the Old Testament, was especially useful to its medieval readers, not for a theology of sexuality or marriage as one might expect, but for the fertile allegorical ground it offered for erotic mysticism and eschatological hermeneutic.² Again and again medieval preachers and biblical commentators privileged its erotic love over that of *agape* to describe the Christian life. That is, the relationship between the lover and the beloved in the Song of Songs was effortlessly and consistently interpreted in their writings to reflect the believer's relationship with Christ in an erotic discourse—the expression and unification of polarities without the annihilation of identities. The intimacy of this theological eroticism creates a kind of paradoxical identity inversion between lovers. As, for example, Augustine describes God to be “more inward than my most inward being” when he writes, “You were with me and I was not with you.”³

The *Rothschild Canticles* both exemplifies and troubles this tradition. This paper will argue that its miniatures illustrate precisely the tension of erotic identity inversion described above, and that it does so through its placement of images of female activity/male passivity alongside its more typical images of *male* activity/*female* passivity.⁴ The images of this fourteenth-century manuscript present normative gender roles and their inversions in tension, ultimately revealing an identical spiritual agency irrespective of sex distinctions. In order to demonstrate this claim, after a brief introduction to the manuscript itself, this paper will survey its depictions of male and female that are consistent with traditional gender roles (i.e., active male/passive female). It will then explore the *Canticles*' “troubling” of gender by examining three images of female activity in

the form of penetration that reverse the tradition: two of a Christ figure and one of a demon being penetrated by a woman (ff. 18v-19, 59, and 51). The analysis of each image will begin by considering a selection of formal elements (e.g., composition, iconography, possible relation to text) and how the images represent female activity/male passivity; it will then build on this information to explicate how the images work to trouble gender and in what way this destabilization operates in the theological message of the *Canticles*.

The *Canticles* Itself

The book itself easily fits in the hand. Of Flemish or Rhenish origins, it was rebound at an early date, and then again into two volumes in the twentieth century. Therefore, it is likely that its texts and miniatures are not all in their original sequence, so one should not definitively interpret them as being in an intentional order.⁵ For example, the Trinitarian Miniatures,⁶ so-called by Jeffrey Hamburger, which one might expect to find grouped together at the end or pinnacle of the manuscript, are interspersed throughout, reflecting the reordering of images in the process of rebinding and/or the intended nonlinear program of the book. At one time, the book contained at least fifty full-page miniatures; forty-six now survive. It also includes 160 smaller illustrations and is rich with marginalia and decorated initials. Of these surviving forty-six miniatures, the majority (twenty-one) are of mystical or Trinitarian content (i.e., in iconography of two male figures and a dove, in various arrangements with billowing cloth). At least ten of the remaining images depict an active or visually prominent male, and at least eight depict an active or visually prominent female.⁷ The bride and bridegroom, or *sponsa* and *sponsus*, of the Song of Songs appear throughout the manuscript. Most of the images are accompanied by a page of text, which itself is a florilegium made up of quotations or paraphrases of biblical (e.g., the Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes), theological (e.g., Augustine, Bonaventure, and Pseudo-Dionysius), and liturgical texts (e.g., breviaries, creeds, and confessions).

Although the exact patronage of the *Canticles* is unknown, it is generally accepted that it was intended for a cloistered, or even independent,

religious because of the *Canticles*' emphasis on bridal mysticism, the contemplative life, and the presence of liturgical and mystical imagery in the text and miniatures. While allowing for the possibility of a male patron, Jeffrey Hamburger has suggested a female monastic patron in his interpretation of the *Canticles*.⁸ Conversely, Sarah Bromberg has argued for a male reader's response to the *Canticles*, specifically in identification with the *sponsa*.⁹ For the purposes of this paper, the sex/gender identity of the patron or reader is not essential in understanding the *Canticles*' message(s). While acknowledging that there would be some degree of difference between a female and male reader's experience, I maintain that ultimately the *Canticles* presents an androgynous theological picture that applies equally to men and women and points to a prelapsarian ideal.

Because this paper concerns itself with iconography of penetration, it is worth noting at the outset that the concept of interpenetration was intrinsic to the medieval understanding of vision. Susannah Biernoff describes the medieval eye as "simultaneously receptive, passive, vulnerable to sensations; and active: roaming, grasping or piercing its objects."¹⁰ The eye "is eroticized as an organ of penetration and a penetrated orifice, closely resembling the flesh in its permeability and libidinal activity."¹¹ Therefore, medievals would not understand "viewing subject" and "visible object" as autonomous entities.¹² And just as their relationship is not unidirectional, neither is that between humanity and God. But the role of the eye as both medium and organ extends even further: "when we perceive something, that thing in a very real way becomes *part* of us; the essence of the thing is drawn forth from the object . . . and impregnates the receptive matter of our sense organs and mind."¹³ So in/animate material is not simply either viewer or viewed, but is also transmitted or assimilated to some degree during the process of vision. Interpenetration is similarly understood in medieval concepts of body—especially in the perception of the female body, which was configured "as both pliable and decentered, always in flux and never stable, her boundaries permeable and her identity labile," in contrast to the masculine body, which was considered sealed and dense.¹⁴ These concepts of vision, permeability, and assimilation are important to bear in mind as we consider the gendered and degendered images of the *Rothschild Canticles*.¹⁵

The *Canticles* and Fourteenth-Century Conceptions of Male and Female

While not all of the images of male and female interaction in the *Canticles* can be strictly categorized into either active male/passive female or active female/passive male, it is safe to say that the majority of them fall into the active male/passive female category.¹⁶ That is, the majority of the *Canticles*' images that depict interactions between male and female figures can be characterized as displaying what from a modern perspective is often referred to as "normative gender roles": a dominant man and a submissive or subordinated woman. Such images privilege a male figure either through visual prominence (e.g., elevation or emphasis in a given composition) or through his posture (e.g., reaching through a window towards a seated woman or enveloping a woman in his embrace).

By operating under categories such as "active female/passive male" this paper does not intend to imply the presence of a strict binary, either in medieval culture or in the *Canticles*. Whereas the relationship between the medieval male and female was undeniably hierarchical, as evidenced, for example, in the content of medieval conduct books, sex and gender distinctions had the potential to be dynamic and variable, existing on a continuum between binaries.¹⁷ Although his discussion of sex and gender deals with Late Antiquity and not the Middle Ages proper, Thomas Laqueur's treatment of the "one sex model" is worth invoking here. In a kind of inversion of modern understandings of the relationship between sex and gender, the sexed body in pre-Enlightenment Europe "must be understood as the epiphenomenon," or convention, "while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real.' . . . To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category."¹⁸ This belief was related to the understanding of anatomy, dating back to Aristotle and Galen, which described female reproductive anatomy as an inverted, less perfect version of that of a male.¹⁹ Notably, for this paper, it was believed that a person's anatomy could be affected and changed by the balance of their humors and by their gendered behavior.²⁰ Thus, one might argue that if gender was considered in an important sense to

be more “real” than biological anatomy, the masculine performance of the *sponsa* in the *Canticles* could in fact be more “real” than her female sex characteristics.

This paper’s focus on the *activities* of human figures as a mode of interpreting the use of gender in the *Canticles* is justified by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s assertion that gender is performed in relation to others: its construction is unavoidable, situated, and inherently social: “gender itself is constituted through interaction.”²¹ In other words, because in the *Canticles* gender is performed by the *sponsa* in her various active and passive actions, her gender identity can change between interactions and images (and logically, so can that of Christ). For late antique and medieval society, although men and women could be identified and distinguished by their sex organs, their differing biological attributes were conceived of primarily as reflections of *naturally* occurring gender roles.²² Because the biological anatomy of the figures of the *Canticles* is almost entirely obscured, this paper will deal exclusively with gender.²³

A brief discussion of some of the representative images of female submission or subservience will offer a background against which to contrast the exceptional images of female activity. The images treated here depict the female body as submissive, passive, and penetrated.²⁴

Our first example (fig. 1, f. 25,) is split into three registers: the top register illustrates the first two lines of the text, which quotes Song of Songs 2:9 and 5:4: “Lo, he stands behind the wall, looking through the windows, looking through the lattice. He puts his hand through the opening, and my belly trembled at his touch.”²⁵ The *sponsus*, identifiable by his crown as Solomon, reaches through the latticework of the window towards the *sponsa*, who is seated in her chamber. Solomon puts his hand through the *foramen*, which translates generically as “opening,” but can also mean “eye.” In this case it seems to refer most obviously to the window; however, the second phrase implies a more erotic encounter as the *sponsa*’s *venter* (i.e., “belly,” “bowels,” or “womb”) trembles at his touch.²⁶ Although contemporary English versions of the Song of Songs appropriately translate the medieval concept as “heart” (in the sense of one’s interior or core), *venter* also carried the connotation of sexual anatomy.²⁷



1. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 24v-25.

Prospiciens has the connotation of seeing something from a distance. Solomon's probing gesture, which touches the *sponsa's* hand through the window by which he had first seen her, conflates the experiences of vision and touch. Moreover, as Biernoff notes, "a series of analogies in medieval literature link the eye to architectural apertures—windows, doors, gateways—and with the vagina, that most closely guarded of corporeal 'gateways.'"²⁸ Like the wound in Christ's side, which will be treated below, the reader encounters an architecture that is at once itself and is referential of both eye and vagina. In other words, in addition to female passivity, this top register also portrays a kind of male penetration of (receptive) female space.

The next quotation, in which Solomon beckons the *sponsa* with several terms of endearment, can be read as a bridge between the first and second registers: "Rise, open to me, my sister, my bride, my beauty, my dove, my immaculate."²⁹ In the second register, with the crown replaced by a cruciform halo, Christ takes the place of Solomon and leads the

sponsa out of her chamber by gripping her wrist; the *sponsa* obediently follows.³⁰ The subsequent Song of Songs quotation similarly operates as a segue between the second and third registers; although the *sponsus* leads the way, the verse is in the words of the *sponsa*: “Come, let us go into the field, let us see if the flowers hasten into fruits and if the pomegranates bloom bright red. There I will give you my breast.”³¹ In the miniature of f. 25, Christ beckons the soul through the window, leading her through a doorway, analogous to the *foramen* of the wound in his side, into the garden of his sacred heart. Despite the verbal initiative of the *sponsa*, this miniature visually presents a decidedly active male figure who physically invades space and assertively dictates the movement of a passive and submissive female figure.³²

Although the penetration of female bodies in the *Canticles* is not performed by male figures directly, the miniatures effectively work to reinforce the concept of the female form as physically and spiritually permeable and penetrable, and therefore unstable. For our next example we turn to f. 68 (fig. 2), in which the *sponsa* contemplatively reclines. It is unclear from the image itself whether the surrounding women apply the leafy vine branches or pluck them from the *sponsa*'s body. The first line of the text, quoting Song of Songs 2:5, implies that the branches are being added: “Sustain me with flowers, surround me closely with apples for I am weak with love.”³³ However, in light of the wine cellar scene of the register beneath it and the miniature of f. 46r, discussed below, it seems equally natural to read this as a depiction of the *sponsa* producing fruit. The words of Christ in John 15 come to mind: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.”³⁴ In the artist's rendering, the *sponsa* literally becomes the branch of Christ, bearing spiritual fruit, an image that reinforces the characteristic penetrability of female body and its reproductive capacities.

The bottom register of f. 68 presents a composition similar to that of the second register of f. 25. In it, Christ leads the *sponsa* by the wrist into his wine cellar, as expressed in the last line of the facing page.³⁵ Because of her contemplation and the “fruit” of love the *sponsa* bore in the top register, she has been invited into the intimate space of the king's wine cellar. In fact, it is possible that the wine Christ offers the *sponsa* is yielded from the very fruit she bore as a “branch” of Christ.



2. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 67v-68.

The process of the couple's entrance into the wine cellar is emphasized by the figure of the *sponsa*. Instead of showing the couple already within the cellar, the artist depicts them in motion—especially the *sponsa*, who leans mid-stride toward Christ, her body halved by the doorframe and her posture stooped so that her face is between his and the chalice, perhaps reinforcing her inferior status. The doorway is thus likened to the wound in his side, which by entering, the soul gains access to the redeeming blood, in this case, represented by the wine.

Next we will consider two images that depict a passive or receptive female body, both in reclining postures. The miniature of f. 66 (fig. 3) is decidedly erotic; in it a female figure reclines on the ground, draped in cloth. Her arms are raised in ecstasy as the figure of Christ peeks out from behind the clouds and the tentacles of a spiraling sun. The curve of his arm mimics that of the sun's groping tentacle-rays; the reclining woman's arms mirror or perhaps react to their reach towards her. In this image of mystical union, the *sponsa* passively receives a vision of Christ.



3. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 65v-66.

The second line of the accompanying text³⁶ reinforces the eroticism of the image and seems to reference Ezekiel 16:8, which in its entirety reads: “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.” The accompanying text also quotes Augustine’s *Confessions*: “I call you, my God, into my soul, that prepares to seize you out of the desire you have inspired within it,” which corresponds to the *sponsa*’s receptive, yet yearning posture.³⁷

A similarly reclining female figure is found in f. 70 (fig. 4); in the top of the three registers in this miniature, the *sponsa* reclines “in a contemplative stupor” on a bed or couch draped in fabric.³⁸ However, in this instance she turns away from the sun whose tentacle-rays frame her head as she covers her face with one hand. In addition to the Bible, the accompanying text also adapts a passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*: “I thirsted; you touched me, and I am inflamed in your peace. I



4. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 69v-70.

loved you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new, late I loved you, and a little afterwards I rushed in to these likenesses of images.”³⁹ The second and third registers effectively illustrate the rest of the accompanying text. In the second register Christ addresses the daughters of Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9) while gesturing to the sleeping *sponsa* with his right hand and the roes and harts (Sg 2:7) with his left hand. It is unclear whether the bottom two registers are meant to be the content of the top register *sponsa*’s vision or dream, or if her sleeping figure serves merely as an illustration of the beloved who should not be prematurely awoken. Regardless, the image is another notable instance of a passive female body within the *Canticles*.

The miniature of f. 46 (fig. 5) makes use of another vegetable metaphor in its rather literal iconographical interpretation of the Tree of Jesse; the tree grows out of Jesse’s side as he reclines, surrounded by Jews identifiable by their pointed caps. The tree sprouts twelve branches, personifying the tribes of Israel with twelve crowned heads. Mary, book



5. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 45v-46.

in hand, hovers in line with the stem between the two sets of branches.⁴⁰ As Hamburger notes, the miniature is based on Isaiah 11, verses 1-2 especially: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,” the latter of which is paraphrased on the facing page.⁴¹ Hamburger points out that:

As inscriptions in a normal Tree of Jesse, these passages would have been understood as references to Christ. . . . The Virgin, or *virgo*, was identified with the stem, or *virga*. . . . Numerous representations of the Tree of Jesse show Christ within a blossom that grows from the leafy vines surrounding the Virgin. In the miniature in the *Rothschild Canticles*, however, Christ is omitted. Mary takes Christ’s place as the flower and fruit of the prophetic tree.⁴²

The penetration in this miniature is not literal, but visual. Mary is superimposed on the tree, which displays her role in the prophecy's fulfillment; she is visually assimilated with the tree and in that sense "penetrated" by it. The presence of the haloed dove of the Holy Spirit, perched atop the tree directly above her head, recalls its penetrating rays commonly portrayed in paintings of the Annunciation. It is through this penetration by the Spirit that Mary bears the "fruit" of Jesus, which gives her the right to be entwined in the Tree of Jesse.⁴³ While the image is indeed a celebration of Mary (as demonstrated by her visual prominence and incorporation into the lineage of Jesus), it is a valorization that is due to her identity as a vessel, that is, as a penetrated and penetrable female body. In fact, the concept of the non-contributing container was so much identified with medieval women that, "the uterus was regarded by many embryologists as an empty, passive container, and the word *vas*—meaning 'vessel' or 'jar'—appears in medieval texts as a synonym for woman."⁴⁴

In sum, while the images discussed above arguably demonstrate some degree of reciprocity between male and female, they more prominently and consistently display the sex and gender binary present in the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ It is against these images of female figures submissively following male figures, passively receiving visions, and being visually penetrated that the *Canticles*' images of aggressive female activity stand out. To these images we now turn.

The *Canticles* and the "Troubling" of Gender

While the *Canticles* does boast several images that privilege or celebrate women, most notably in the "Marian Miniatures," at least two images stand out for their representations of women as active, even aggressive, agents over and against male objects. The first of these is the two-page opening of ff. 18v-19 (fig. 6) which, as a two-page opening, has no accompanying text. The top register of f. 18v shows the *sponsa* and Christ meeting and embracing in a garden. In contrast to some of the images discussed above, it is the *sponsa* who leads the way by gripping Christ's wrist, thus signaling his submission.⁴⁶ Once in the garden, they meet in an intimate, face-to-face embrace. The lower register depicts



6. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 18v-19.

the *sponsa* bearing a lance which visually connects the two pages. Its diagonal leads us directly to Christ's side, a destination reinforced by the gesture of his right hand, his jutting finger reminiscent of that of the Doubting Thomas. Biernoff suggests that here it is actually the bride's gaze that wounds Christ: "The lance signifies her love, of course, but more specifically it is a literalisation of the penetrating, desiring gaze."⁴⁷ The *sponsa* pulls back her headdress to better see her target; the gesture of her hand at her eyes reinforces the connection between the act of seeing with the penetration of the lance. Her vision is therefore just as active or penetrative as the lance itself.⁴⁸ Thus, whether it is the lance, her vision, or the combination of the two that penetrates Christ's body, this image presents a drastic inversion of the common trope of woman as visual object under a male subject's gaze.⁴⁹ The proverbial tables have turned: the penetrated has become the penetrator, the wounded wounds.

On the facing page (f. 19), the reader encounters Christ at the moment after he has been pierced—he is presented as the Man of Sorrows,

temporally ambiguous, and, in this case, unusually fully naked. The dynamic twist of his posture allows him to not only maintain his modesty, but also to be simultaneously tied to the pillar and nailed to the cross while directing the reader's gaze to his side. The crown of thorns between his feet anticipates the spinning suns that appear throughout the rest of the manuscript.

Of course, an active agent of penetration implies some sort of receiver. In this case, the space created by the lance is equally important, that is, the wound in Christ's side.⁵⁰ For interpretative aid, Hamburger points to the text of the preceding page (f. 17v), which quotes Revelation 3:20 and Song of Songs 4:9.⁵¹ "Christ's side-wound is the door at which the soul knocks and desires entry. The wound is merely the gateway to the *cor salvatoris*, the seat of love and mystical fulfillment."⁵² Biernoff challenges Hamburger's reading, instead asserting that since it is *Christ* who knocks in the Revelation verse, the implication is not the soul seeking entry to the sacred heart, but Christ seeking entry into the *sponsa's eyes*. Therefore, her "gesture refers both to the verse from Song of Songs, and to Revelation 3:20."⁵³ Citing Peter of Limoges's use of the term *foramen* (opening) for both "eye" and "side-wound" in *De oculo morali*, Biernoff claims that the conflation allows Christ's wound to be also a metaphorical eye, vagina, and womb.⁵⁴ In this way, the wound is a window through which the reader sees the mystical union—depicted in the top register of f. 18v—taking place *within* the sacred heart of Christ. "The viewer—as bride—adopts a masculine, penetrative, role in response to Christ's nominally masculine, but carnally feminine body. She is also, however, feminized in her identification with Christ, and penetrated by his love."⁵⁵ That is, this facing pair of miniatures doubly troubles normative medieval concepts of gender: the *sponsa's* physical initiative in leading Christ into the garden renders him submissive; her wounding thrust of her gaze and spear render him passive and penetrated.⁵⁶

The second example that depicts a female performing penetration is found on f. 59 (fig. 7). The miniature illustrates Song of Songs 8:9, half of which is paraphrased on the facing page, "If she is a wall, we shall build for her a silver fortress; we shall surround her on a wall."⁵⁷ By framing the *sponsa* in the doorway, the artist literally interprets the text, associating her with both the wall and door of the fortress. The *sponsa*



7. *Rothschild Canticles*, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 404, ff. 58v-59.

is now also the *parva soror* (little sister) of the Song of Songs, protected in the fortress built by her siblings. Directly above her, Christ hovers in an aureole of clouds, embracing “the flaming sun that remains his attribute throughout the *Rothschild Canticles*.”⁵⁸ Two virgins on elevated platforms flank Christ and the *sponsa*. Meanwhile, the *sponsa* takes aim with a spear at a monstrous figure that can be interpreted as either Satan or a demon.⁵⁹ “In brandishing a weapon, thrusting it upon her victim and assuming an aggressive male gaze she becomes phallicized. This narrative device regenders this victim-turned-hero as male.”⁶⁰ The dramatic downward angle of the spear’s thrust echoes that of the unicorn miniature, discussed below, although the gesture here in f. 59 is defensive, not sacrificial.

This exchange naturally takes place in a fortress, which echoes the architecture of the “armed camp” of the Heavenly Jerusalem, but Hamburger proposes that “the fortress is probably best understood as an allegorical image of the soul’s steadfastness against temptation. . . .

The constancy with which the *Sponsa* preserves her virginity makes her like a wall, impervious to the outside world. She is represented as a member of the Church Militant.”⁶¹ This text-image pair is one of encouragement; it declares God’s power, protection, and ultimate victory over evil. Because the demonic figure is sexless and genderless, this is not (necessarily) an image of a female body acting against a male body. However, I propose that this image still significantly highlights female agency and aggression: the *sponsa* defends herself aggressively, and, not incidentally, by penetrating another body. Meanwhile, Christ observes the action at a distance.

Finally, we turn to f. 51 (fig. 8), an image that faces a blank page, unaccompanied by text. It is an adaptation of a story in the *Gesta romanorum*, which tells of two virgins seducing an elephant in order to collect its blood to dye the king’s garments.⁶² Here the artist has replaced the elephant with a unicorn, thereby associating it with the Mariological Hunt for the Unicorn, so-called because Christians interpreted the Hunt for the Unicorn as an allegory for Christ’s Passion, and only a virgin, interpreted as Mary, could tame the unicorn.⁶³ In the top register the unicorn approaches two virgins—one is seated and clothed, bearing

8. *Rothschild Canticles*,
General Collection,
Beinecke Rare Book and
Manuscript Library, Yale
University, MS 404, fol. 51.



a bucket, the other dances ecstatically in the nude, her figure at once recalling the Man of Sorrows of f. 19 and the celestial dance in the top register of f. 30.

In the lower register, the virgin, now clothed, cradles the unicorn as its side is pierced with a lance by a figure who, judging by the shorter hair and garment, may be identified as a male hunter. However, as Sarah Bromberg has noted, the *Canticles* contains several similarly ambiguously male or androgynous figures (e.g., ff. 161, 162, 165), rendered so by their loose, generic garments and beardless faces: “Although beardlessness indicates youth, it simultaneously signifies androgyny by portraying prepubescent sexuality.”⁶⁴ If she is correct in her assessment, the hunter of the unicorn may just as well be female, or at the very least, ambiguously gendered. And if this is the case, her argument may have further implications as Christ also appears in several miniatures without a beard (e.g., 162); these depictions would then contribute to the feminization or degendering of Christ in the *Canticles* (as in ff. 18v-19).

The unicorn is identified as a type for Christ, not only by the spear-inflicted wound in its side, but also in the collection of its blood at death.⁶⁵ The bucket, which is suspended in the bottom margin, takes the place of the chalice of many medieval crucifixion images. When understood as Christ, the unicorn’s blood is not intended to dye garments, but paradoxically to wash them clean, as in the book of Revelation: “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”⁶⁶ While the female figure in this image performs a task perhaps more “typical” of her gender and sex (i.e., seduction), this iconography of the penetration of the unicorn–Christ as performed by a male figure, not unlike ff. 18v-19, renders Christ passive and penetrated.

Conclusion

In addition to the beardless, androgynous figures noted by Bromberg, and the subversive images of female activity/male passivity treated in this paper, the *Canticles* has several other examples (e.g., ff. 6v-7, 13 and 165v) “in which figures of different genders perform analogous activities.”⁶⁷ That is, while such images do not obviously destabilize gender norms,

by depicting male and female figures performing the same gestures and tasks the images work to equate the two groups hermeneutically, so that “the user of the manuscript is expected to be able to shift gender identification even when the iconography is the same.”⁶⁸

As another lens through which to consider the *Canticles*' gendered and degendered images, I would like to invoke somewhat anachronistically Judith Butler's take on drag. Butler describes gender as “an imitation without an origin.”⁶⁹ By means of parody, drag exposes the “imitative structure of gender itself,” as well as the illusory concept of an interior, organizing, or primal gender identity.⁷⁰ Because of the dissonance between the performer's own sex, sex category, and gender, drag has the ability to destabilize and denaturalize the assumed unity of the three categories: “the parody is *of* the very notion of an original.”⁷¹ In the same way, gender is destabilized in the *Canticles* by the dissonance between the *sponsa*'s sex and the gender she performs (masculinity) by penetrating instead of being penetrated. Although the female figure of the *Canticles* does not perform drag in her dress or physical appearance, it can be said that by virtue of her activities (e.g., penetration, assertiveness) she *performs* masculinity. There is a similar dissonance between Christ's male sex and the gender he performs by being passive, submissive, and penetrated.

The medieval concept of a sex and gender continuum was mentioned at the beginning of this paper; in closing, it is beneficial to return to and push that concept further. Several groups of medieval people were considered to occupy the “third gender” space (e.g., powerful women, eunuchs, clergy, monks, and nuns) on account of their marginal biological and social statuses.⁷² Although the relationship between male and female was undeniably hierarchical, sex and gender distinctions were dynamic and variable, existing on a continuum between binaries.⁷³ However, women were not the only ones expected to move towards the male end of the continuum; men could be too “hot” (masculine) or too “cold” (feminine) and therefore had to adjust accordingly. The center of this continuum between male (hot) and female (cold) was a lukewarm middle ground occupied by biologically (e.g., hermaphrodites, eunuchs) and socially (e.g., transvestites, slaves) ambiguous subjects.⁷⁴ That is, the very existence of the male/female binary allowed for and perhaps

created the possibility of a third gender. Murray concludes her essay by identifying chastity with the third gender: “The holy person was a type of its own, a person in whom sex and gender binaries were erased, with the result they could live together as one.”⁷⁵ That is, a life of celibacy freed both men and women from the respective extremes of the gender continuum, and brought them closer to one another, not into the ambiguity of the hermaphroditic center but, Murray suggests, into “the prelapsarian one flesh that was created in God’s image. . . . Rather than a binary of male and female, one flesh created a triad between men, women, and God.”⁷⁶ The *Canticles* similarly argues for the achievement of the sexless and genderless ideal of the Garden through its presentation of male and female figures performing actions across the gender continuum.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that the *Rothschild Canticles*’ exceptional images depicting female activity/male passivity alongside and in contrast to those of male activity/female passivity trouble medieval gender norms for both men and women. Thus the *Canticles* ultimately communicates that both male and female believers have access to mystical union with Christ, and that, à la Augustine, while the desire for God is implanted in the believer, the Christian must also initiate contact with and pursue God in a Song of Songs-like romance. While the *Canticles* does not argue for equal rights in the day-to-day banality of the domestic realm, it does set forth a theological message that spiritually empowers women to be assertive and men to be passive and pursued, and vice versa.

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END NOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Professors Kathleen Flake and Jacqueline Jung, who have been influential in the formation of this article, as well as Professors Robin Jensen and Elizabeth Moodey for their support.

2. Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 40-42.

3. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.6; 10.27, (pp. 43, 201).

4. N.B. by “active female” I am referring to iconography which presents a female figure in the role of primary subject, asserting her agency either through gesture (e.g., piercing Christ’s side, as in ff. 18v-19) or through the prominence and/or placement of her body within the image’s composition (e.g., central and elevated, as in f. 57). In such images the male (Christ) is relegated to the role of a simple bystander or even to adopting a more conventionally feminine posture (i.e., passive, receptive, penetrated).

5. However, it is highly probable that even in its original condition the *Rothschild Canticles* “was not seen in a linear way, as we would want to read it today, but as something more open and multifarious.” Michael Camille, review of *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300*, by Jeffrey Hamburger, *Journal of Religion* 72, no. 3 (July 1992): 431. Therefore it is justifiable to interpret its images in relation to one another, regardless of their locations within the manuscript.

6. This group of miniatures would also provide fascinating subject matter for gender-theory driven study. Their amorphous, mystical, and cryptic iconography consists of billowing fabric, spiraling suns and their rays, the figures of the Trinity, and circles within circles, in diverse combinations and configurations, many of which invoke imagery of an eye or womb.

7. I say “at least” here because the meaning of some of the images that could fit into the last two categories is ambiguous and therefore resists such categorization. The *Canticles* also includes twenty-three drawings of hermit saints which differ in style and execution and seem to have been added at a later date. The *Canticles* can be divided into two parts: the first, which is the subject matter of this paper, is a series of self-contained text-images pairs; the second, in a different style from the first, consists of continuous text accompanied by historiated initials and miniatures.

8. Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 2-3, 161-2. This seminal work on the *Rothschild Canticles*, expanded from Hamburger’s dissertation, still looms large among scholarly treatments of the manuscript. Subsequent works that have addressed the *Canticles* to varying degrees include Jérôme Baschet, “Les images: des objets pour l’historien?” in *Le Moyen Age aujourd’hui: Trois regards contemporains sur le Moyen Age: histoire, théologie, cinéma: Actes de la Rencontre de Cerisy-la-Salle: juillet 1991*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Guy Lobrichon (Paris: Le Leopard

d'Or, 1997); Flora Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response," in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Wybren Scheepsma, "Filling the Blanks: A Middle Dutch Dionysius Quotation and the Origins of the *Rothschild Canticles*," *Medium Aevum* 70, no. 2 (2001): 278-303); Sarah Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings of the *Rothschild Canticles*," *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 1 (2008). www.differentvisions.org (an online peer-reviewed journal).

9. "A male reader and viewer would not be identifying with a representation of a woman, but with a desire for Christ which has been gendered female." Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," 5.

10. Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 41.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 100.

14. Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 161. See also Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 17-39.

15. Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," uses the term "ungendered" to describe the *Canticles'* androgynous figures. This paper, on the other hand, will use "degendered" throughout to indicate the action of troubling, or inverting, a discernable gender identity.

16. Similarly, while the presence of female figures (whether in the guise of the *sponsa*, the Virgin Mary, or other women) is significant, the majority of figures in the *Canticles* are male.

17. Roberta L. Krueger, "Conduct Literature" in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 159-61; Jaqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34-51; 38-39.

18. Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

19. *Ibid.*, 25-35.

20. See, for example, Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes," 38-40.

21. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender*

and *Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125-51; 129. Cf. Francine M. Deutsch, "Undoing Gender," *Gender and Society* 21, no. 1 (2007): 106-27. Raine Dozier, "Beards, Breasts, and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 3 (2005): 297-316; 299, extends West and Zimmerman's thesis by proposing that sex and sexuality/sex category are just as socially constructed as gender.,

22. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 25.

23. Bromberg makes a similar argument, although only in regard to certain androgynous (beardless) and angelic figures of the *Canticles*: "The manuscript invites a reading that relies more on an analysis of these figures' gender than their sex. A major component of the *Rothschild Canticles*' visual language is the devotional activity of these figures, which prescribes the actions of the reader/viewer. Rather than communicate that a lack of physical sexual characteristics is necessary for devout pursuits, these images suggest to the reader/viewer that in order to participate in these forms of worship, one must imitate, but not become, an asexual being." "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," 14. While her comment is concerned with *ungendered* or androgynous beings in the *Canticles*, I contend that it applies equally to the degendering actions of Christ and the *spōsa*.

24. I recognize that it would be a mistake to deny such images any sense of agency. As Saba Mahmood has demonstrated, agency, and perhaps especially that of women, is not limited to acts of rebellion or aggression. See, for example, Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 177-221; 180.

25. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 178. Transcription: En iste stat post parietem respiciens per fenestras prospiciens per cancellos. Misit per foramen manum suam, et venter meus contremuit ad tactum eius. (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.)

26. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 81, suggests that the text, by replacing the Vulgate's *intremuit* with the more intensified *contremuit*, implies that Christ is equally moved by the encounter. N.B. *intremuit* can be translated as "to begin to tremble/quake," while *contremuit* can be translated as "to tremble/shake/quake all over."

27. J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 100-101, 107.

28. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 53.

29. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 178. Transcription: Surge, aperi michi, soror mea, sponsa mea, formosa mea, columba mea, immaculata mea (Sg 2:10, 5:2).

30. For an argument that being thus grasped is an image of submission, see Corine Schleif, “Hands that Appoint, Anoint, and Ally: Late Medieval Donor Strategies for Appropriating Approbation through Painting,” *Art History* 16 (March 1993): 16-21, cited in Bromberg, “Gendered and Ungendered Readings,” 4.

31. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 178. Transcription: Veni, ingrediamur in agrum, videamus si flores fructus per currierunt, et si floruerunt mala punica. Ibi dabo tibi ubera mea (Sg 7:11-12). *Ager* (field) was also a metaphor for the female pudenda, even into the medieval period (Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 24, 82-84). It is worth noting that by including the words of the bride of Song of Songs, the compiler of the *Canticles* forces, or at least encourages, the male or female reader to identify with the (female) bride.

32. The bottom register simply depicts the couple in the garden or field inspecting the fruit blossoms. Among the flowers, the figures illustrate the corresponding text of Song of Songs 2:16: “My beloved is to me and I am to him, who grazes among the lilies.” Transcription: Dilectus meus michi et ego illi qui pascitur inter lilia.

33. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 194. Transcription: Fulsite me floribus, stipate me malis quia amore langueo. The second line of the text calls for the winds to blow over the *sponsa*'s “garden”: “Surge aquilon et veni auster; perfla ortum meum, ut fulgent aromata illius.” *Hortus*, though often as *hortulus*, was used as a metaphor for the female genitalia (Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 84). This is especially relevant to the concept of the *hortus conclusus*, a private, intimate and therefore, guarded space. It is also analogous to the medieval eye, as the gateway to the *hortus conclusus* of the soul, which needed to be guarded against temptation (Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 53).

34. Jn 15:5, ESV [English Standard Version].

35. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 194. Transcription: Introduxit me rex in cellam vinoriam. Translation: The king led me into his wine cellar (Sg 2:4).

36. *Ibid.*, 193. Transcription: Venit tempus tuum, tempus amantium. Translation: Your time has come, the time of lovers.

37. Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 106; Augustine, *Confessions* 13.1. Transcription: Invoco e deus meus in animam meam, quam preparas ad capiendum te ex desiderio que ei inspiras (translation by Hamburger).

38. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 111. See also Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images*, 400-1200 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174. "In classical as in monastic rhetoric, withdrawal to one's chamber indicates a state of mind, the entry to the 'place' of meditative silence which was thought essential for invention."

39. Hamburger, *ibid.*, 112; Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38. Transcription: Sero te amavi pulcritudo cum antiqua pulcritudo tantam nova, sero te amavi, et Paulo post hiis formis deformis irrueram (translation by Hamburger).

40. Similar compositions of an elevated or ascending female body in the *Canticles* include ff. 15, 48, 50, 57 and can be contrasted with images of Christ elevated, such as ff. 5, 15, and 34.

41. Is. 11:1-2, ESV. The accompanying text also paraphrases Isaiah 37:31: Mittet radicem deorsum et faciet fructum sursum. Translation: It shall take root downward and bear fruit upward.

42. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 90.

43. It may also be worth noting that both *radix* (root) and *virga* (branch) were celebrated metaphors for the penis in Medieval Latin (see note 29 and Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 14-15, 24). Of course, since they are biblical quotations in a devotional context, it is unlikely that such a meaning was intended, although the connotation may still have been present.

44. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 33. This extreme passiveness of women was reflected in late antique and medieval medical texts, which offered a variety of speculations on the reproductive process: that women's bodies offered only a space for incubation and no generative material; that they provided only material substance and nourishment for the fetus, while, more importantly, the soul was provided through the male seed; or that conception was caused by the male partner having an "idea" in the womb of the female. See, for example, Biernoff, 32; Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 35, 42, 59. Conversely, the womb was also associated with the penis, as its inverse, suggesting "it is an active, sexual organ (as distinguished from a passive, reproductive organ) and is in tune with the view that the womb and therefore (by metonymy) the woman are dominated by an insatiable sexual appetite." Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 178.

45. See, for example, Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes," 34-51.

46. Schleif, "Hands that Appoint," 16-21. See note 30 above.

47. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 159.

48. On eye “emissions” as bodily fluids, see Biernoff, *ibid.*, 49 and 58. Hamburger does well to make the connection between the *sponsa* and Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced Christ’s side at the crucifixion and who, by touching Christ’s blood, was healed of blindness. Longinus is typically “depicted either kneeling or standing, holding the lance with one hand and pointing to his healed eye with the other” (Hamburger, *Rothschild Chronicles*, 75). As in the case of Longinus, by piercing Christ’s side the *sponsa* experiences the love of Christ and cultivates intimacy with him.

49. See, for example, Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 41-59, in which she argues, in part, “that the active, sexually aggressive gaze is paradigmatically masculine” (57).

50. In the words of J. N. Adams: “No objects are more readily likened to the penis than sharp instruments.” And under the metaphor of sharp instruments there is no larger category than weapons. Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 14, 19. Although the term is not present in the text of the *Canticles*, the use of the *hasta* (lance, spear) in the image as a mediator between the *sponsa* and Christ is no doubt phallic and logically enters a *vagina* (sheath)-like space.

51. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” Rev. 3:20, ESV. “You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.” Sg 4:9, ESV.

52. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 72.

53. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 160.

54. *De oculo morali* (On the Moral Eye) is a late thirteenth-century anthology for preachers. For a similar discussion, see Lewis, “Wound in Christ’s Side,” 212-17.

55. Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 161.

56. The feminizing or subordinating of Christ in this image belies a substantial trend in medieval devotion in which Christ is described by male and female writers alike in feminine terms, especially as a mother who births, nurtures, nurses, and disciplines. See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, “‘. . . And Woman His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 257-88; 262-68, and Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

57. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 189. Transcription: Si murus est faciamus ei pro pugnacula argentea; circumdamus super eam murum. In the original, the entire verse reads: Si murus est aedificemus super eum propugnacula argentea, si ostium est conpingamus illud tabulis cedrinis. *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), Sg 8:9.

58. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 97.

59. Except for a lack of wings, the hellish figure closely resembles that of f. 30. It is unclear why Hamburger identifies the figure as Satan in this instance. He claims that the figure at the bottom right is also Satan, shown debilitated by his wound. While certainly possible, I find his assertions unfounded in both the textual and visual information and therefore unnecessary speculations.

60. Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," 7. While this quote is actually taken from the context of Bromberg's discussion of Carol Clover's film theory of slasher horror films, it aptly describes the masculinization of the penetrating *sponsa* in the *Canticles*.

61. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 97-98.

62. The *Gesta romanorum* is a late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century collection of stories.

63. Hamburger, *Rothschild Canticles*, 99.

64. Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," 13.

65. The extreme length of the unicorn's horn (read: phallus) may also contribute to the interpretation of the unicorn as a male figure.

66. Rev. 7:14, ESV.

67. Bromberg, "Gendered and Ungendered Readings," 8.

68. Pamela Sheingorn, review of *The Rothschild Canticles* by Jeffrey Hamburger, *Art Bulletin* 74 (December 1992): 680, cited in Bromberg, *ibid.*, 8.

69. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 175.

70. *Ibid.*, 173-74.

71. *Ibid.*, 175.

72. Murray, "One Flesh," 37-38.

73. *Ibid.*, 38-39.

74. *Ibid.*, 43-48.

75. *Ibid.*, 48.

76. *Ibid.*, 50-51.