

Visibly Trans? Picturing Saint Eugenia in Medieval Art

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ABSTRACT: What happens when medieval depictions of gender-crossing saints get refracted through a transgender prism? Focusing on objects and artifacts associated with St. Eugenia of Rome, this article considers the extent to which medieval artists confronted the genderqueer potential of Eugenia’s legend. Often the saint was overtly feminized, patently obscuring her road to sanctity as a gender crosser. But sometimes the crossing itself was rendered at least partially visible—notably in scenes representing the moment when, after a period living as a male monk, Eugenia is placed on trial and forced to reveal her “true” identity as a woman. Some depictions of Eugenia may therefore resonate with more recent expressions of queer and trans identity. This prompts critical reflection on the concepts of *passing* and *trans visibility* in histories of transgender.

KEYWORDS: cross-dressing; Eugenia; medieval; saints; visibility

ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS:

Figures 1a, 1b. St. Eugenia. Polychromed statue, circa 1500. Choir of Saint-Pierre, Varzy (Nièvre). Photos: Robert Mills.

Figure 2. St. Eugenia. Glass roundel, late fifteenth century. Musée Auguste Grasset, Varzy. Photo: Musée Auguste Grasset.

Figure 3. Eugenia on trial. Miniature in Jean de Vignay, *Miroir historial*, translation of Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, circa 1335. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arsenal 5080 réserve, fol. 154r (detail). Photo: BnF.

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Eugenia, Astudillo (Palencia). Polychromed and gilded wood. Photo: Robert Mills, by permission of the bishopric of Palencia.

Figure 7. Eugenia on trial. Detail from Santa Eugenia altarpiece. Late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, with later additions. Iglesia de Santa Eugenia, Astudillo (Palencia). Polychromed and gilded wood. Photo: Robert Mills, by permission of the bishopric of Palencia.

Figure 8. Eugenia on trial. Detail from Master of Dinteville Allegory (Bartholomeus Pons?), *Triptych of St. Eugenia*, 1535. Oil on wood. Choir of Saint-Pierre, Varzy (Nièvre). Photo: Musée Auguste Grasset.

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Hagiography has long been recognized as providing a sanctioned space for representations of bodily and gender transformation in premodern Europe. Written stories about holy women who assume a masculine disguise, or cultivate bodily attributes such as tonsures or beards that conventionally mark out holy men, have provided grist to the mill in debates about gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages (for overviews, see Anson 1974; Hotchkiss 1996: 13–47). Yet relatively little attention has been devoted to the presence of these figures in visual and material culture. This article considers a selection of artifacts associated with one such individual, Eugenia of Rome, who, to follow a Christian calling and maintain a life of chastity, spent several years dressing and living as a man.

In what follows I propose casting a queer eye over representations of Eugenia in medieval art, viewing depictions of the saint's life through a transgender prism. This offers a means of reaching beyond the questions of attribution, quality, and artistic style that have tended to direct research on these objects to date. Such a perspective not only helps to bring into focus the genderqueer potential of Eugenia's road to sanctity, but also speaks to the partial erasure or obfuscation of that same potential. Just as it is vital to trace the development of trans eradicating impulses in modernity, so it behooves scholars engaged in historical work to acknowledge the epistemological violence that has been done to non-binary bodies and genders across time and within academic scholarship (Cromwell 1999; Weismantel 2013). Additionally, however, in our efforts to advance trans affirmative modes of historical inquiry, we need to remain attuned to the spaces for thought and action that the objects under consideration may conceivably have generated.

Both at the time of their creation and in the centuries before *transgender* emerged as a category of identity and gendered selfhood, images of gender-crossing saints would not necessarily have held the same significance as they do for today's queer and trans communities. Yet emphasizing only the violence of representation risks impoverishing our sense of the past also as a field of possibility, plurality, and difference.

At the outset, it is worth acknowledging the distinct and varied meanings that gender crossing held for late medieval Europeans. Some scholars (e.g. Bullough 1982; Bynum 1987: 291) have suggested that women dressed as men mainly for practical reasons, a pattern that conforms to theological advice in the period. In her *Scivias*, a text styled as a series of visions voiced by God himself, the abbess and visionary Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) condemns cross-dressing, by men or women, “so that their roles may remain distinct”—unless the man’s life or woman’s chastity is in danger, in which case the practice is permitted out of necessity and “fear of death” (Hildegard of Bingen 1990: 278; see further Mills 2015: 90–98). Others have argued that at least for some women, notably Joan of Arc, donning male attire was a “powerful symbol of self” (Crane 2002: 73), one at least partly indicative of “spiritual advancement” (Hotchkiss 1996: 68). Some legal records, meanwhile, paint a different picture. Women arrested for wearing male clothing in London at the end of the Middle Ages tended to be accused of concubinage or prostitution, thus associating cross-dressing with sexual licentiousness in the company of men; references to women attempting to pass as men for extended periods were extremely rare (Bennett and McSheffrey 2014). Unusual too were cases in which women were condemned at courts of law for posing as men to sustain erotic relations with other women (see, e.g., Puff 2000). Taken together, such cases nonetheless support the view

that “medieval benevolence toward female crossdressers was clearer in fiction than action” (Bennett and McSheffrey 2014: 6).

The objects gathered together in this article provide no straightforward clues as to their reception or interpretation by pre-modern audiences. Today’s female cross-dressers, trans, and non-binary people may well recognize aspects of their experiences and identities in some of the examples discussed. But a question mark remains over whether, before terms such as *transgender* came into their own in the 1990s, people would have found, in visual depictions of a legendary saint and martyr, critical resources for sustaining their own gender-crossing or gender-non-conforming lives. We can of course speculate about the likelihood of a given interpretation (and imagination is a powerful tool in queer and transgender history: see further Karras and Linkinen 2016). But while it is beyond the scope of this article to reflect in detail on every single interpretive possibility or set of contexts, Eugenia’s example can usefully inform current debates about the existence of transgender in periods before our own.

Contributors to this special issue were asked to consider what emerges “if we look for trans* before *trans**.” What is at stake in imagining and recovering trans experiences and identities before the advent of modern concepts and terminology? Here I pose a series of related questions. Under what circumstances, historically, has gender’s multiplicity and transformability been rendered visible? When does the idea of crossing, implied by the prefix *trans*, come into view as a facet of gender? And how is *queer*, itself implicated in notions of moving across, represented visually? While some textual accounts of Eugenia’s life and martyrdom have been discussed at length, notably the versions in Latin and Old English, artworks associated with Eugenia have been much less

studied. As such, the story is known today primarily through texts; one of the aims of the present study is to redress the balance in favor of visual as well as textual treatments. By expanding the archive of trans experiences and identities in the direction of objects that convey or respond to gender diversity through non-verbal forms, we enrich our understanding of “trans*historicities” as a frame.

A focus on visuality also allows me to draw out the connections between trans historicity and trans visibility. Visibility is a key issue in contemporary experiences of transgender. Never have trans people been under such a glaring spotlight as they are today. Representations of individuals who transition from male to female or from female to male have exploded in the public sphere. It is a phenomenon that *Time* magazine recently dubbed “The Transgender Tipping Point” (Steinmetz 2014). But the individuals who are the subjects of this seemingly relentless exposure tend, for the most part, to be viewed as “passable.” Passing is a common but controversial trope in modern accounts of trans experience. The key factor at play in the ability to pass is whether the person represented is readily identifiable as transgender. Is their gender queerness visible in some way, or do they manage to get through life as a cis-looking trans person? The imagery disseminated in the wake of this so-called tipping point is seemingly marked by a preference for effective or convincing modes of passing, for conformity to perceived gender norms and binaries (photographs illustrating the *Time* article are a case in point). One problem with this bias is that it diminishes the visibility and viability of people who actively identify as non-binary, or who experience themselves and are perceived by others as genderqueer or gender fluid.

Trans visibility is bound up with temporality. When a trans person comes into view *as* transgender, he or she has ostensibly failed to pass, a failure that threatens to expose what Judith Halberstam calls “a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future... Visibility, under these circumstances, may be equated with jeopardy, danger, and exposure, and it often becomes necessary for the transgender character to disappear in order to remain viable” (2005: 77–78). Halberstam’s analysis is directed at representations of transgender experience in film, but the comments are equally applicable to images of St. Eugenia. The saint’s exposure as female, after a period spent living as a male, causes a ripple in historical time. Recognition of the saint’s womanly past spells the restoration, as least outwardly, of femininity and subsequently comes to define Eugenia’s future as a (female) virgin martyr. But another past—Eugenia’s time as a man—also exerts a shaping influence on the saint’s vocation as a virile virgin. Meanwhile, in the narrative present which coincides with the act of exposure and revelation, Eugenia’s gender is rendered mobile, even undecidable. One possible outcome here is trans legibility: Eugenia’s gender queerness becomes visible, albeit momentarily, when the saint’s different pasts collide. But that same queerness can also be made to disappear, whether through acts of suppression, erasure, or looking away. My argument is that medieval image makers prevaricated, adopting different perspectives and representational strategies depending on the context.

On one level, Eugenia’s legend can be interpreted as incorporating an episode of successful male passing. According to medieval hagiographers, Eugenia was the daughter of a Roman patrician, Philip, who took his family from Rome to Alexandria in Egypt, where he had been appointed prefect, during the reign of Emperor Commodus (180–192

CE). A gifted student, Eugenia discovers Christian teachings during her time in Alexandria and subsequently determines to spurn marriage and devote herself to a life of chastity. Aged sixteen, she gets permission from her unwitting parents to go on a rural retreat with her eunuch slaves Protus and Hyacinthus, who share their mistress's passion for learning. Encountering a procession of Christians, Eugenia decides to enter the nearby monastery dressed as a man. Wearing male garb and introducing herself as Protus's and Hyacinthus's brother "Eugenius," Eugenia is welcomed by the community's miracle-working abbot, bishop Helenus, who sees through the young woman's disguise but agrees to admit the trio anyway. Personally overseeing their baptism, Helenus keeps Eugenia's female embodiment secret from the monastery's other inhabitants.

Three years later, following the death of their mentor, Eugenius becomes abbot of the house; leading by example, he is praised for his exceptional humility, discipline, and healing powers. A wealthy widow, Melantia, comes to Eugenius to be cured of a fever and subsequently develops an intense passion for the abbot. Attempting to woo the object of her affections with thoughts of worldly pleasures and marriage, Melantia is harshly rebuked by Eugenius. Frustrated by the rejection, the widow subsequently accuses him of attempting to rape her and a case is brought before the prefect Philip in Alexandria, who no longer recognizes his daughter now she has assumed a male persona. During the public trial, Eugenia explains that just as loving God is a "manly" (*uiriliter*) pursuit so they have "performed the perfect man" (*uirum gessi perfectum*) by donning male attire and maintaining chastity for Christ (quoted in Whatley 2012: 107; cf. Stimm 1955: 78).¹ Then, as a last resort, the protagonist rips off their clothing as proof of innocence. Recognizing the accused's "true" identity, Philip converts to Christianity, along with his

wife Claudia and Eugenia's brothers; Philip is subsequently elected bishop of Alexandria before being assassinated by the prefect who arrives to replace him. Eventually, after returning to Rome, the saint, her eunuch companions, and other family members are arrested as Christians and martyred. Eugenia herself is beheaded on Christmas Day, after undergoing various torments and a stint in prison, and subsequently appears to her mother in a heavenly vision at the saint's tomb.²

People who, like Eugenia, are perceived as conforming to traits associated with the gender they identify as rather than the gender (or sex) assigned at birth, may get by—at least for some of the time—without their transgender status becoming visible. Blending or passing well enough to be taken as cisgender, such individuals are discernibly queer or trans only within certain well-defined parameters. Eugenia's own birth gender is revealed to audiences within the story at a specific juncture, during the saint's trial. Forced to reveal her bodily sex, in an act that violates what might be called Eugenia's access to “passing privilege,” the saint had previously been taken for a man by everyone except her eunuch companions and the bishop who originally admitted her to the monastery. As if to prove the point, even another woman falls for Eugenia-as-abbot. While Melantia's passion arguably raises the specter of sexual relations between women, the saint is depicted as embodying the traits (including visual characteristics) associated with maleness so successfully that homosexual passion comes into focus only fleetingly (see further Clark 2009: 192–93; Mills 2015: 207–8). For the duration of her extended sojourn in the monastery, Eugenia is effectively presented as a passing male. In these terms, the saint is neither visibly trans nor genderqueer.

The dissemination of Eugenia's legend in medieval art raised the stakes considerably. Whereas textual renditions of the legend highlighted the saint's perceived status as a gender crosser, image makers tended to maintain an overriding emphasis on Eugenia's femininity, thereby rendering invisible or seriously underplaying her temporary acquisition of male identity and prerogative. Conversely, a small number of depictions of Eugenia in art present alternative perspectives. Very occasionally the images in question seem visibly to convey dimensions in the saint's story that cannot easily be assimilated to a language of passing, troubling gender in ways that appear to resonate with some modern-day experiences and expressions of trans visibility and gender queerness. From one perspective, the examples surveyed call into question the assumption that holy gender crossers can straightforwardly be reclaimed as "transcestors," to use a recent coinage. From another, they help us to appreciate how, in pre-modernity as today, gender queerness was intermittently discernible in the field of vision.

As Saisha Grayson 2009 has demonstrated, in an article exploring what she terms the "problem of transvestite saints for medieval art," artists who tackled Eugenia's story in the Middle Ages tended to represent only the narrative's conclusion—the moment when, following the restoration of her female identity, Eugenia died a martyr. For instance, in a fifteenth-century illuminated copy of a French translation of the *Golden Legend* analyzed by Grayson (2009: 150–152), Eugenia is depicted dressed in characteristically female garb while her eunuch companions wear neutral-looking monastic habits.³ Several other representations of the saint similarly emphasize Eugenia's feminine appearance following the trial. Varzy, a small town in Burgundy on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, had a collegiate church dedicated to

Eugenia, which had reputedly been in possession of the saint's relics since the tenth century (Anfray 1951; Boisseau 1905: 11–14, 64–66; Jobert 1867; Lussier and Palet 1934). Although the Collégiale Sainte-Eugénie was largely destroyed during the French Revolution, and remnants of the site are now mainly in private hands, the local museum and another church in Varzy dedicated to St. Peter still possess several Eugenia-related objects. These include a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century statue (figs 1a, 1b), which represents the saint wearing the crown of martyrdom, carrying a book (presumably a sign of Eugenia's dedication from an early age to learning), and dressed in the garments of a late medieval noblewoman (Cario 1990: 47). The statue is identified by an inscription on its base and by repetition of the phrase "Santa Eugenia" along the edge of the saint's tunic.⁴

There is also a stained-glass window roundel, roughly contemporary with the statue, which depicts the saint nimbed, clasping a book, and carrying a palm of martyrdom (fig. 2). Significantly the glass, although it highlights Eugenia's ultimate trajectory as a female virgin martyr, retains a textual trace of the saint's former identity as a male monk by seemingly using a masculine form of the name, *S. Eugène*, as opposed to the feminine *Sainte Eugénie*.⁵ Conversely, at the back of the statue (fig. 1b), Eugenia is depicted with a head of wavy, golden hair stretching almost to her waist, as if to emphasize the restoration of femininity following the saint's years of being shaved and tonsured. Lengthy or extravagant locks are also a feature of several other Eugenia images, as we shall see. Cumulatively, these representations give the impression that image makers were inclined to subject Eugenia to a process of compensatory refeminization in response to the virile virgin topos that intermittently shapes the legend. With the possible

exception of the gendering of the name on the glass panel, after all, viewers would be hard pressed to find visible traces of the saint's manly past in the images just cited.⁶

The moment in the story with perhaps the greatest potential for subverting gender binaries is the trial, when Eugenia, dressed as a male monk, reveals their previous identity as a woman. Once again, however, some artists appear deliberately to have steered away from showing Eugenia explicitly as a gender troubling figure. Thus, a fifteenth-century illumination discussed by Grayson (2009: 165–66) shows Eugenia clearly dressed as a female nun, replete with veil, rather than as a tonsured male abbot.⁷ The saint's habit, hitched up to reveal a white petticoat, signals visually that this is the moment of the big reveal, thus eliding the text's emphasis on breasts. An illustration in a French translation of Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale* (fig. 3) from around 1335 seems less tame by comparison: it features a nimbed, longhaired woman opening a dark blue tunic with a red lining to her father's gaze, revealing her pubic region even as she draws a hand across her breasts. As in the Vézelay sculpture, Philip raises his right hand, but Eugenia is now shown in the process of stripping from head to toe. A woman in a headdress to the right, presumably the saint's mother Claudia, holds out a new red tunic, a garment doubtless deemed appropriate to the resumption of womanly status (it has a pattern of golden stars and circles, which distinguishes it from the "monastic" garb being removed by Eugenia); two other women, one with her hands in a gesture of prayer, observe from the sidelines. This is the last of four images illustrating the Eugenia legend in the manuscript. The others show Eugenia being instructed in philosophy by her father; the saint's baptism in the company of Protus and Hyacinthus; and Melantia visiting Philip to accuse the woman she thinks is a man of violating her sexually.⁸ While in the

miniature representing baptism, the presiding bishop, Helenus, throws water over three individuals shown naked from the waist up, Eugenia's long hair contrasts markedly with the tonsures of her companions, which again suggests that her masculine performance has been filtered through an emphatically feminizing lens. Grayson is surely correct in her assessment that such depictions steer away from rendering visible what she calls the “disruptive guise” (2009: 169) of a woman in male garb.

The earliest and best-known depiction of Eugenia's trial in medieval art is a twelfth-century carved capital in the abbey church of Vézelay in Burgundy (Ambrose 2004; Ambrose 2006: 39–44; Crane 2002: 94–95; Grayson 2009: 155–61; Loos-Noji 1990; Mills 2015: 200–208). In the high Middle Ages Vézelay became significant as one of the starting points for pilgrims travelling through France to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. This carving (fig. 4) is one of only a handful of surviving images that visibly convey what might be termed, with the benefit of hindsight, the narrative's genderqueer potential. Again, the focus is on the act of revelation, but the twelfth-century sculptor has adopted a different strategy from the later medieval manuscripts just cited. A shorthaired, tonsured Eugenia is portrayed in the center of the capital, looking toward the prefect while opening their tunic; to the left stands the widow Melantia, who points to the accused with one hand as she holds her own, long hair with the other. The sculpture balances strongly gendered figures to the left and right, with a more ambiguously gendered persona in the center. Here is an image that potentially resonates with modern debates about trans visibility. The scene does not connote gender passing so much as gender crossing. Frozen in time to a moment just before the chest is revealed fully, Eugenia's boyishness lingers even as “he” is on the verge of becoming

“she.” Yet the anticipation of that revelation, at least in the mind’s eye, provokes a vision of the saint’s gender that seemingly transcends the binary frame in which it is simultaneously embedded.

One of the most striking depictions of Eugenia’s trial from the Middle Ages is a fourteenth-century altar frontal, believed to have been commissioned for Santa Eugènia de Saga (Ger), a small church located in the Cerdanya region of Catalonia (Blanc 1998: 56–58; Cook 1959; Crane 2002: 94–95; Melero-Moneo 2005: 93–99). Now in a museum in Paris, the frontal tells the story of Eugenia’s life and martyrdom across eight panels. In the first two scenes Eugenia escapes with her eunuch companions, before receiving baptism at the hands of the Christian bishop. The bishop, presiding over the monastery in which they seek refuge, keeps Eugenia’s bodily sex hidden from the other monks. Interestingly the scene of baptism depicts Eugenia facing the viewer frontally: her head is surrounded by a nimbus to indicate that she is already saintly, but she also holds her hands in front of her chest, thus obscuring precisely the physical attribute—breasts—that comes into view in the story’s climax. Next, we see Eugenia transformed into Eugenius the abbot, visiting the sick widow with one of his fellow monks (fig. 5, left); still nimbed, to enable viewers to track the protagonist from one panel to the next, Eugenius has the same clean shaven, tonsured appearance as other religious figures in the painting. Then the trial in Alexandria is depicted (fig. 5, right), in a scene that adopts a strikingly similar arrangement to the Vézelay capital and could plausibly be influenced by it (the frontal was probably created in a town with links to the Camino de Santiago).⁹ This time Melantia kneels before Eugenia’s father, the pagan judge, and a fourth figure, wearing a monk’s habit, has been introduced. But in the Catalan painting, as at Vézelay, the father

is bearded and raises his right hand; again, events are fixed temporally to the moment just before Eugenia reveals their body, producing a queerly disjunctive vision of female masculinity.

Scenes then follow that relate Eugenia's subsequent martyrdom in Rome. One image shows the Roman ruler pronouncing judgement, while in another Eugenia begins her ordeal as a martyr. The torments commence with the saint being thrown into the River Tiber to be devoured by fishes and miraculously saved. Next, she is pushed by an executioner into the furnace of the imperial baths, from which she reportedly emerged unharmed; this scene is combined with another episode also described in the written legend, in which Eugenia is visited by Christ in prison. Finally, the saint is shown being decapitated, her soul carried up to heaven. In these last four scenes Eugenia's appearance has been restored to that of a typical noble woman, wearing a trailing garment and long hair. The frontal contrasts masculine or bi-gendered imagery in the upper register with feminine imagery in the lower register. As in the Vézelay carving, the painting maintains a strong dichotomy between male and female, even as it also highlights a moment when that binary is disrupted. In the trial scene itself, of course, the ambiguities of the saint's gender identity are kept in play—and it is this kind of depiction, I am arguing, that potentially resonates with some modern articulations of gender queerness. Refusing to show a final, embodied act of displaying female breasts, Eugenia is effectively suspended in a state of continuing maleness, which conveys the spiritual transformation the saint has undergone by maintaining sexual purity. Eugenia's experience does not simply involve a temporary change of clothing, in other words; it also entails a sort of inner transformation. The altar frontal concludes, like some of the manuscript illuminations and sculptures

discussed above, by highlighting Eugenia's trajectory from virile woman (or differently-bodied man) to female virgin martyr. But it places greater emphasis than some of the other illustrative sequences on Eugenia's performance as a man.

Painted perhaps a few decades after this extraordinary painting is a cycle of frescoes devoted to Eugenia in Nevers cathedral, the existence of which affirms Burgundy's status as the most prominent locus for Eugenia-related imagery in medieval Europe.¹⁰ Unfortunately the paintings are badly preserved, so it is not clear whether they originally included a representation of the saint's trial in Alexandria; what remains appears only to relate to the martyr's torments in Rome. But the selection of episodes reportedly still visible in the nineteenth century (Guérin 1882: 467), namely Eugenia's arrest, attempted drowning in the Tiber, attempted burning in the furnace of the imperial baths, and imprisonment during which she is sustained by a visit from Christ, corresponds remarkably closely to the arrangement of the lower register of the Catalan altar frontal. This suggests that narrative cycles depicting Eugenia's life and passion were not necessarily as rare as has sometimes been claimed by recent commentators (Grayson 2009: 155), and that her story may have been disseminated visually via international as well as regional networks, notably those associated with pilgrim roads to Santiago.

Lending support to this hypothesis is a late Gothic altarpiece (figs 7, 8) in the church of Santa Eugenia in Astudillo (Palencia) in northwestern Spain (Cantero 2000; Yarza Luaces 1987: 46–47; Wethey 1936: 98–99), which has received scant attention in literature on Eugenia's cult to date. Astudillo is located just a few miles from the Camino de Santiago, around three days' walk west from the city of Burgos. The altarpiece, which has been linked stylistically with the workshop of the celebrated Burgos sculptor Gil de

Siloé (c. 1400–1505), incorporates several polychromed wood carvings representing episodes from the saint’s life. In the large, central scene Eugenia appears, book-in-hand, flanked by her eunuch companions Protus and Hyacinthus (fig. 6). There is a strong resemblance between this image of the saint and the statue at Varzy depicting Eugenia with extravagantly long golden locks (figs 1a, 1b). Immediately to the left of this scene, however, is another showing Eugenia exposing their breasts during the trial (fig. 7). Dressed in a black habit, and wearing a tonsure that intriguingly suggests that the assumption of masculine appearance also prompted a change of hair color, Eugenia proudly displays their chest—replete with prominent nipples—to the gaze of Philip and his entourage. Elsewhere Eugenia assumes a distinctly feminine appearance, even in the carvings identified as showing the saint taking the vows of a monk (top left) and visiting the enamored widow Melantia (top right); the final scene (bottom right) appears to show Eugenia enthroned and receiving a crown from Protus and Hyacinthus, who each place a hand on the golden tresses spread across her shoulders.¹¹ Arguably, these images place an overriding emphasis on the saint’s “womanly” identity; but, as with some of the other renditions of the trial, beholders are also afforded a glimpse of different gendered possibilities.

The Astudillo trial scene cannot really be described as imaging a transman-in-the-making. Nor will terms such as *butch* fully account for the meanings such imagery conveys: narrative, visual, and cultural contexts evidently work against such sanguine—and patently anachronistic—interpretations. Indeed, the denouement of the trial generates a reverse scenario: Eugenia’s female masculinity is effectively *unmade*. But the flash of recognition that some modern viewers may experience when confronted with such

images draws attention to the possibility that representing and contemplating non-binary notions of gender is not simply a privilege of the present. Willfully anachronistic deployments of terminology clearly have a role to play in tracing a genealogy for queer and trans subjectivities as they are currently conceived; but a fleeting sense of connectedness with images and objects created half a millennium ago also draws attention to the possibility that, long before terms such as *transgender* and *transsexual* entered the English language, gender was already being envisioned as a plural and potentially mutable phenomenon. This is important because it affirms the existence of alternatives to the homogenous gender norms and patriarchy customarily associated with the period we call the Middle Ages. Even as the alternatives are ultimately imaginary (the “real” St. Eugenia is as elusive as the historical Jesus), such representations open our eyes to the prospect that, even during an epoch renowned for its conservative gender politics, different inflections and nuances of gender were sometimes rendered visible.

Another, better known depiction of Eugenia’s trial features in a triptych commissioned in 1535 by the bishop of Auxerre for the saint’s church in Varzy (Boisseau 1905: 81–85; Cario 1990: 100–103). As with the Astudillo altarpiece created a few decades earlier, the left-hand panel (fig. 8) representing the trial again shows Eugenia in a moment of transition, except that the saint now openly displays a breast. At some point in the 1800s the bare breast was covered over with black pencil or paint, seemingly acknowledging the erotic potential of the image.¹² Alternatively, what disturbed the nineteenth-century censor may have been the disjunctive combination of a masculine tonsured head with visibly female morphology; again, the image arguably conveys the possibility of non-binary genders and bodies. As in the Catalan altar frontal, the saint’s

femininity is restored in the central panel showing her martyrdom. And, in an additional move that confirms Eugenia's status as a reassuringly female virgin martyr, the right-hand panel shows the saint with a full head of hair, ringed with a crown of martyrdom, appearing to her mother Claudia at the site of her burial. The painter of the triptych has been identified as the Master of the Dinteville Allegory due to the work's similarities to another panel now in New York representing the powerful Dinteville brothers (Elsig 2005; Thuillier 1961); François II de Dinteville was the bishop who commissioned the work. A likely contender for the role of the "master" in question is a Dutch artist called Bartholomeus Pons, who is recorded as working in Burgundy around this time (Bruyn 1984). Setting aside the question of the painter's identity, however, it is worth acknowledging the resonances with earlier depictions of Eugenia's trial. Here is further evidence that in theory, and sometimes in practice, gender crossing was not simply a textual possibility but also representable in art.

Recently some scholars have set out to explore how the human experiences and potential that we currently label *trans* resonate with representations of gender variance and diversity in pre-modernity (see, e.g., Karras and Linkinen 2016; Mills 2015; Raskolnikov 2010; Weisl 2009). If, in the words of Judith Butler, it is necessary today to develop a "new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living with for a long time" (2004, 51), then the images of Eugenia collated here arguably contribute to a deeper awareness of a medieval chapter in that long running history. Although, as we have seen, artists often deliberately reined in the possibilities of Eugenia's story, refraining from visualizing the saint's trial in Alexandria or recoding the

episode to reduce its impact, every so often their responses took a seemingly more open course.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging the political dimensions to this project. Collating and analyzing such imagery crucially demonstrates how, even as efforts are made to normalize gender crossing or to render it invisible, gender queerness endures as a possibility. While gender-crossing saints such as Eugenia were represented as experiencing the benefits of passing privilege, their example reminds us that passing is a situational activity, one that often remains fraught with danger. If being visibly trans is (understandably) not a desirable alternative for those striving to avoid such risks in the real world, discovering instances of trans visibility in the Middle Ages can nevertheless be a powerful corrective to the idea that gender normativity and gender binaries are in any way “natural” or anchored in “tradition.” And if, as I have been arguing, images of gender queerness can indeed sometimes be discovered in medieval art, they convey a field of possibility that is as rich and provocatively complex as any of the experiences that today might be grouped under the umbrella of transgender.

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In conclusion, I turn to a final example of Eugenia-related imagery that allows me to approach the issue of trans visibility from a different angle. Secreted away in a small treasury attached to the parish church of Saint-Pierre in Varzy, where several artifacts from the former Collégiale Sainte-Eugénie have ended up, is a remarkable thirteenth-century reliquary associated with the martyr (Bouillet 1901; *Les trésors des églises* 1965: 427). The box, shaped in the form of a small, shrine-like edifice or edicule, is surrounded on each side by the name—and in three cases portrait—of a female virgin martyr (figs

9a–9d). The inscriptions identify the individuals in question as Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia, and Eugenia. The words “*Sancta Eugenia*” currently appear below a statuette of an uncrowned figure carrying a book (fig. 9c), but a colored lithograph (fig. 10) made by the nineteenth-century sculptor and scholar Jules Dumoutet, who in 1859 embarked on project to produce a detailed and lavishly illustrated study of the collegiate church in Varzy, suggests that at one time this name appeared in a different position, at the base of a small window surrounded by a gilt frame (fig. 9a). Later photographs also confirm that Dumoutet’s illustration accurately conveys the shrine’s original appearance.¹³ Thus, at some point between the creation of these reproductions and recent times, the base of the reliquary has been turned to a new position. In what I take to be the correct, earlier configuration, however, the window was designed to draw the viewer’s eye toward the relics contained within, reputedly pieces of skull, which the inscription on the base identified as belonging to Eugenia.

The representational strategies adopted by the makers of this object are seemingly twofold. On one level, the reliquary is resolutely figurative, indicating what kind of person Eugenia really is. Emphasizing Eugenia’s connections with a series of feminine-looking portraits, the object visibly suppresses the saint’s stint as a male abbot in favor of her status as a female virgin martyr. Yet staying with the figurative, it is worth acknowledging connections between Eugenia’s story and those of the other saints: Agnes, for instance, miraculously grew her hair to disguise her body and protect her chastity, while Agatha’s breasts were removed and miraculously restored in an episode that potentially resonates with Eugenia’s own transition between genders; for her part, Cecilia is said to have exerted control over her husband Valerian by persuading him not to

consummate their marriage, as well as assuming a preaching and teaching role by instructing Valerian and his brother in the intricacies of Christian theology (Jacobus de Voragine 2012: 101–4, 154–57, 704–9). Each saint thus registers the potential for virginity to bleed into virility in some way. Even what looks like an insistently “feminizing” interpretive prism turns out, on closer inspection, to be less securely gendered.¹⁴

Moreover, the reliquary’s refusal (at least in its original configuration) to image Eugenia directly registers the potential for bodies to change and to be changed over time. Notably, the monstrance displaying the saintly relic is surrounded by signs of the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. While these symbols were possibly added after the thirteenth century, their presence signals that when audiences view the reliquary they are not simply being confronted with the material remnants of a woman called “Eugenia.” They are also seeing, through a glass darkly as it were, the God-man with whom the martyr has become spiritually united.

If, as St. Jerome (c. 340–420) once famously declared, woman “wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man, because we all wish to attain the perfect man” (*Commentariorum in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, quoted in Mills 2015: 206). Of course, Jerome’s perfect man is Christ, represented figuratively on the reliquary in the form of a tiny figure of Christ crucified (fig. 9a), held aloft by an angel that is thought to have been added in the fifteenth century (*Les trésors des églises* 1965: 427). But these figurative devices operate in tandem with a meditative framework. Eugenia’s body is beheld via its relics; but tantalizingly an anchoring image of that very body is simultaneously withheld from view. There, in the

gap between the body's evocation and its image, lies the possibility of contemplating gender transformation more abstractly. This is a mode of contemplation that is cognitively generative, in other words. Displaced from the field of earthly vision into the domain of the imaginary, viewers are being invited to behold Eugenia's transcendent state. Picturing Eugenia in abstract, then, other bodies, other genders might be thought.¹⁵

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Endnotes

¹ I refer to Eugenia as “they” when discussing the trial, in a nod to the episode’s genderqueer potential.

² The Latin legend’s sources, expertly analyzed by Whatley 2012, include the *Acts* of another gender-crossing saint, Thecla; the episode of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 39; and a pre-Christian tale recorded by the mythographer Hyginus about the first Athenian female physician, Agnodice, who cross dresses to enable her to practice medicine. My summary draws on those in Whatley (2012: 109–111), Bonner (1920), and Boisseau (1905: 86–127), as well as the versions included in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend* (2012: 551–53) and a thirteenth-century Old French version in a manuscript—Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 818—that contains texts with Burgundian forms (Stimm 1952: 7–9; 1955: 67–87).

³ Morgan Mâcon *Golden Legend* (Flanders, 1445–65), translated by Jean de Vignay, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.672, fol. 74v.

⁴ Inexplicably, the saint’s right sleeve is also inscribed with the words “Santa Genovefa,” possibly denoting an error on the part of the sculptor or the repurposing of a sculpture initially intended to represent Paris’s patron saint.

⁵ Nonetheless, in the Old French text edited by Stimm (1955), the masculine form is given as “Eugenios” and the feminine form as “Eugeni,” so the “Eugene” spelling in the glass roundel is possibly a variation on the latter.

⁶ On the “virile woman” theme in medieval Christianity more generally, see Newman 1995. Whatley (2012: 108–9) points out that the early Latin legend also concludes by re-inscribing Eugenia’s femininity, notably aligning her typologically with the beautiful “virgo” Eve, which implicitly identifies her as bride to the second Adam Christ. Also, the Old French text edited by Stimm (1955) refers almost exclusively to the saint using the feminine form of the name “Eugeni,” even during the period when she is dressed as a monk. It is only during the saint’s entry to the monastery and in some of her interactions with Melantia that the masculine form “Eugenios” is deployed.

⁷ Jean de Vignay, *Miroir historial*, translation of Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* (France, 1463), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 50, fol. 393v.

⁸ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arsenal 5080 réserve, fols 152r (instruction), 152v (baptism), 153v (accusation).

⁹ Melero-Moneo (2005: 94–95) detects the presence of “linear Gothic” aesthetic principles, a style associated with Anglo-French influences, and suggests that the workshop in which the frontal was painted was likely located in Puigcerdà, a town in Cerdanya at the head of one of the Catalan tributaries of the Camino de Santiago. Catalonia is also peppered with numerous other buildings and places named after the saint, many originally Romanesque foundations, which reveal a fervent devotion to Eugenia in the region. These include Santa Eugènia de Berga (Osona), Sainte-Eugénie, Saillagouse (Cerdagne), and Sainte-Eugénie, Souanyas (Pyrénés-Orientales).

¹⁰ For a brief notice, which cautiously identifies and dates the surviving paintings in the north arm of the cathedral transept, see *D'ocre et d'azur* (1992: 297). Though current research favors a late fourteenth-century date, previous commentators have described the murals as emanating from the thirteenth century (Locquin 1913: 28) or earlier (Crosnier 1858: 151; Guérin 1882: 467). Locquin mentions making use of an account or drawing by a nineteenth-century museum curator in Nevers, Louis Du Broc de Ségange, which I have not been able to locate.

¹¹ Or is the object being raised above Eugenia's head a comb? This would lend further weight to the possibility that the sculptors deliberately accentuated the perceived restoration of femininity following the trial. Wethey (1936: 98) tentatively identifies the scene as showing the saint in prison, but it seems more likely, given the presence of the throne, that she is being depicted in a heavenly state following martyrdom. Thanks to José Luis Calvo Calleja, Delegado Diocesano de Patrimonio Cultural y Artístico de Palencia, for granting permission to allow me to photograph the altarpiece in situ.

¹² A reproduction of the panel in its unrestored state, showing the bowdlerization, appears as plate 2 in Hervey and Martin-Holland (1911). See also Boisseau (1905: 84) for reference to the use of pencil to conceal the saint's exposed chest.

¹³ One photograph features on a postcard dated 1892, which shows the reliquary flanked by two arm reliquaries from the treasury of Saint-Pierre in Varzy. Others were taken by Luc Joubert in conjunction with an exhibition at the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris, on which see further *Les trésors des églises* 1965. Another late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century arm reliquary emanating from the church of Sainte-Eugénie in Varzy, known as the "Bras d'Or de Sainte Eugénie" (Cario 1990: 143; *Les trésors des églises* 1965: 426)

was destroyed in 2000 by thieves trying to recover its precious metal. A third reliquary, in the form of a bust, was recorded in the eighteenth century (Jobert 1867: 152, citing a 1792 inventory taken at the time of the church's suppression) but has also subsequently been lost (Crosnier 1858: 152; Guérin 1882: 468). I am very grateful to Jean-Michel Roudier of the Musée Auguste Grasset for facilitating my visit to the treasury in 2016, which enabled me to inspect and photograph the extant reliquary and other objects associated with Eugenia's cult.

¹⁴ Other connections also presumably determined the choice of martyrs, notably the fact that Agnes, Cecilia, and Eugenia all met their deaths in Rome. Auxerre cathedral's collection of relics included bones reputedly belonging to all four saints, as well as a host of other female virgin martyrs (Lebeuf [1743] 1855, 4:241–42). The bishops of Auxerre had strong connections with Varzy, building a palace there and sponsoring the Collégiale Sainte-Eugénie; in 925 bishop Gaudry was gifted Eugenia's relics by the pope during a trip to Rome and donated the lion's share to the church in Varzy (Boisseau 1905: 13; Guérin 1882: 468; Lebeuf [1743] 1855, 1:232).

¹⁵ For an interrogation of how abstraction, in modern sculpture, provokes reflection on gender's multiple capacities, see Getsy 2015; for medieval theories of imagination and the process, termed "abstraction," through which the intellect extracts intelligible from sensible objects, see Karnes 2011.