'Lely-wyte, clene with pure virginyté': The N-Town 'Nativity', the Virgin Mary, and Trans Misogyny

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This article examines how the Virgin Mary's immaculate childbirth in the N-Town 'Nativity' illuminates recent scholarship on trans misogyny. I argue that the N-Town 'Nativity' diagnoses Mary's enduring virginity after childbirth as itself a form of gender variance, and the play punishes the doubtful midwife Salomé for her lack of faith in another's claim to womanhood. Moreover, this early Christian drama allows scholars today to contest the hostile myth that trans misogyny is at once natural and biblically sanctioned. Mary's durable yet opaque virginity generates the anatomical scrutiny too often evoked by contemporary trans femininities.

This article examines how the Virgin Mary's on-stage gynecological exam in the N-Town 'Nativity' illuminates and historicizes recent scholarship on trans misogyny.[1] By close reading what we now call obstetrics in early Christian theatre, I argue that the N-Town 'Nativity' diagnoses Mary's enduring virginity after childbirth as itself a form of gender variance. What Jules Gill-Peterson, Elías Cosenza Krell, and Julia Serano, among others, theorize as 'trans misogyny' sheds new light on this late medieval drama even as Mary's resistance to gendered classification provides historical depth to critical work in trans studies.[2] I take up Gill-Peterson's astute definition of 'trans misogyny' here to describe medieval virgins who 'aren't so definitively excluded or erased as they are degraded and punished by those who lust after them in anger, fascination and affection'.[3] After all, a good portion of 'Nativity' involves a pair of midwives, Salomé and Zelomy, probing and evaluating Mary's body, which, I suggest, remains stubbornly opaque.[4] So too does Mary's experience of labour — or lack thereof — deviate from what we now call a cis woman's delivery of a child.[5] If Mary's virginity is valid only insofar as it is confirmed by an obstetrical exam, then the play punishes the culpable midwife Salomé for a familiar kind of trans misogyny: that is, her lack of

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faith in another's claim to womanhood. All the more reason to consider how a close reading of this drama and scholarship in medieval trans studies by critics such as M.W. Bychowski, Masha Raskolnikov, and Tess Wingard can mutually fortify one another.[6] Moreover, the midwife's punishment at the conclusion of the N-Town 'Nativity' — Salomé's hand withers after she touches the Virgin Mary — allows scholars today to contest the hostile myth that trans misogyny is at once natural and biblically sanctioned. The play renders Mary's unclassifiable womanhood divine despite her enduring anatomical scrutiny too often generated by trans femininity today.

I should emphasize from this article's outset that the N-Town 'Nativity' stages historically specific rather than culturally constant forms of trans misogyny. The play uses late medieval — and, more specifically, East Anglian — understandings of virginity to depict Mary as gender variant, though scholars have not interpreted her as such.[7] That the lurid terms for a woman's body in the N-Town 'Nativity' — as 'Lely-wyte', 'clene', and 'pure' (305) — persist today shows us, in the words of Emma Maggie Solberg, that 'unlike a hymen, the construct of [Mary's] virginity cannot be destroyed'.[8] To further complicate the matter of Mary's body, scholars such as Robert L.A. Clark and Claire M. Sponsler have studied how women's roles on the late medieval English stage would likely have been performed by costumed adolescent boys whose voices had not yet deepened.[9] Two boys in drag performing a dramatic gynecological exam would seem to demand the scholarly methods of trans studies, but few medievalists have adopted this theoretical approach. Existing criticism on the Virgin Mary in the N-Town plays instead operates on theoretical paradigms that privilege feminine sexuality while obscuring her potential gender variance.[10] As a result, past readings of early drama can sometimes naturalize the assignment of sex in late medieval England. While a significant body of scholarship has justifiably claimed Mary as a proto-feminist figure,[11] I propose that virginity in the N-Town 'Nativity' shares the perverse logics of trans misogyny that disciplines those who are feminine for the condition of their bodies. Furthermore, what I am calling Mary's gender variance unsettles medieval studies scholarship on virginity, which tends to assume the cis womanhood of its subjects.[12] After all, Mary knows as much as any woman that proper — and, as this article argues, cis — femininity can be reduced to the state of one's physical form. At the same time, I aim to avoid the critical tendency whereby scholars, like midwives, must look 'underneath [her] dress' to claim a medieval trans figure.[13] In the N-Town 'Nativity', Mary already undergoes invasive examinations that are conceptually congruent with what historian Beans Velocci calls modern trans medicine's 'standards of care'.[14] If Mary is not

so much cared for as she is evaluated, then she can reveal how trans misogyny continues to operate today: via routine exposures that make legible and treatable the trans-enough woman.

Given that current histories of gender-affirming practices often extend from Magnus Hirschfeld to Harry Benjamin, we can learn from the N-Town 'Nativity' how late medieval 'women's medicine' usefully expands recent scholarship on trans healthcare.[15] While criticism in trans studies over the past two decades has vibrantly theorized what Hil Malatino terms 'trans care', this scholarship is often limited to the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.[16] The historical brevity of this otherwise robust criticism has the unintended effect of casting trans femininity as the exclusive product of hormonal and surgical interventions emerging throughout the 1900s. If we follow such scholarly approaches to gender transition, then late medieval England might appear exclusively cis. Not so. Scholars of medieval medicine such as Monica Green, Caz Batten, and Leah DeVun have shown that long before the twentieth century, routine healthcare practices — including but not limited to 'women's medicine' — accounted for a wide array of gendered variations.[17] Indeed, DeVun has carefully tracked aggressive attempts by medieval surgeons in Europe to align diverse sexual morphologies with cisgender norms.[18] Recent histories of trans healthcare, then, can benefit from what Carolyn Dinshaw more than two decades ago aptly theorized as 'getting medieval'.[19] So too can the Virgin Mary in the N-Town 'Nativity' animate Julia Serano's account of how 'people are who feminine, whether they be female, male, and/or transgender, are almost universally demeaned compared with their masculine counterparts', albeit in the Middle English terms of an early Christian drama.[20] As I argue in this article's conclusion, the N-Town 'Nativity' offers us a late medieval alternative to the diagnostic tendencies of modern trans care: an inept midwife turned gatekeeper must beg for salvation from her sanctified patient. In what follows, I examine how Mary's repeated — and, I should add, repetitive — narration of her virginity provokes earlier forms of trans misogyny.

Early in the N-Town 'Nativity', Mary establishes a felt incongruity between what is immediately visible — she is pregnant — and an opaque condition — she is a virgin. Contradictory as these claims may seem, they evoke a familiar trope of twentieth- and twenty-first-century trans life writing: the 'trapped in the wrong body' narrative.[21] But Mary does contain another body within her own, and she offers a remarkably gender variant account of gestation. Rather than experiencing contractions in the period leading up to the delivery of her child, Mary prophesies an immaculate birth, for 'Cryst, in me, hath take incarnacyon — / Sone wele be borne the trowth I fele' (92–3). She is not wrong. Mary may be no midwife, but

she acknowledges in vivid terms that her pregnancy is both carnal and deific. The Middle English 'incarnacyon' refers to the Christian doctrine that God became man, but it also conjures 'the growth of new tissue in a wound or sore'.[22] Suspended between flesh and spirit, this infant emphasizes just how incongruous Mary's pregnancy is. Her child seems to 'take' shape in a manner that deviates from widely circulated Aristotelian understandings of generation and gestation.[23] Mary instead describes the body trapped within her as a 'trowth' that she can 'fele', and these words resonate with the persistent vocabulary of modern trans autobiography.[24] In philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher's words, 'the so-called truth about gender (one's naked body) becomes nothing more than a misleading appearance, while concealed identity is now the locus of moral sex'.[25] The N-Town 'Nativity' is fixated on this very 'concealed identity' in the form of Mary's child, and she continues to narrate her interior sensations: 'Betwyn myn sydys I fele he styrth' (97). The term 'styrth', here, describes 'plucking' and 'pulling' as well as 'swinging' and 'flapping', and it choreographs fetal movement in utero.[26] That this movement takes place 'Betwyn myn sydys' shows us that Mary's body is still susceptible to the motions of the infant, despite her apparently unchanging virginity.[27] Given the child's estimated time of arrival, Joseph soon departs to 'seke sum mydwyvys, yow for to ese / Whan that ye travayle of child this day' (120–1). But no such 'travayle' occurs.[28] Instead, Mary experiences nothing less than a solitary communion with 'Goddys hygh grace' (117). The stage directions tell us: 'Hic dum Joseph est absens, parit Maria Filium Unigenitum' [Here while Joseph is gone, Mary brings forth the Only Begotten Son] (126).[29] The Latin *parere* implies making an object visible more than giving birth, and the play's midwives confront the anxieties evoked by the frictionless delivery of this child.

Trans misogyny in the 'Nativity', then, does not so much question Mary's womanhood as it requires profane evaluations of precisely what kind of woman she is. These interrogations of Mary's form — is she or isn't she a virgin? — share the logic of modern medical diagnostics that require patients to prove, many times over, that they are '"really" a transsexual'.[30] When Joseph first employs Salomé and Zelomy, the midwives promise to 'help thi wyff fro hurt and grame' (156). That is, these women offer to guide Mary through the 'significant caesura' that Malatino aligns with medical and, in the context of trans care, surgical upheavals in one's life.[31] But Mary's experience of childbirth is neither hurtful ('hurt') nor grievous ('grame'). Her child is not only alive and well: he is radiant and 'nevyr so clere in ther lyghtnesse' (165). The child's divinity, figured as innocent ('clere') light, anticipates Mary's own chaste condition.[32] The newborn promises to confirm his mother's virginity, and she declares 'The chylde that is

born wyl preve his modyr fre, / A very clene mayde, and therfore I smyle' (180–1). Note how the infant rather than Mary is the subject of this phrase, and he 'is born' passively without any sign of maternal labour. So confident is Mary in her condition as both 'modyr' and 'mayde' that she smiles and refers to the source of the child without worry: 'Here is the chylde this werd hath wrought, / Born now of me that allthynge shal save' (192–3). The newborn is a product of fate ('werd') rather than a father, and Mary's expectations for her son's good works are high.[33] Even Joseph's limited sexual education allows him to recognize Mary's childbirth as unusual, for 'Modyr on erth was nevyr non clere / Withowth sche had in byrth travayle' (204–5). If Mary's virginal maternity is a kind of gender variance, then the following scenes deploy Salomé and Zelomy to inspect and classify her body. The play's midwives turned medical gatekeepers are quick to doubt the validity of Mary's insistent claims to virginity. The repeated medical examinations that follow are not as anachronistic as they should be in our present moment.

Zelomy's examination of Mary's body makes explicit how medieval iterations of trans misogyny evaluate and affirm appropriate expressions of womanhood. The midwife's medical expertise enforces a strikingly cisnormative understanding of childbirth: 'In byrth, travayle muste sche nedys have / Or ellys no chylde of her is born' (206–7). Adequate labour, or 'travayle', proves a woman's motherhood. But Mary retains her faith in her virginity despite the midwives' disbelief, and she aligns the unrelenting forgiveness of a Christian god with her enduring maidenhood: 'He that nothynge wyl have forlorn / Sent me this babe, and I mayd mylde' (216–17). The verb 'sent' suggests a far less laborious delivery of the child, while 'mayd mylde' can describe both a maiden and one who is made — or created — mild.[34] Stranger still, Mary invites the midwives to perform an on-stage obstetrical exam to confirm that she is indeed 'mayd mylde':

> Of this fayr byrth that here is myn,
> Peyne nere grevynge fele I ryght non.
> I am clene mayde and pure virgyn:
> Tast with youre hand yourself alon.   (222–5)

These lines emphasize Mary's complete lack of pain and grief even as they lay claim to that 'fayr byrth' known as Christ. For the first time in the N-Town 'Nativity', Mary overtly joins her condition as a 'clene mayde' with that of a 'pure virgyn'. Her startling invitation to 'Tast with youre hand yourself alon' is almost certainly what Clark and Sponsler term 'queer play'.[35] After all, 'tast' describes both tasting and touching.[36] But this scene might be better described as *trans* play: like so many patients to come, Mary must initiate and undergo a medical

exam to confirm what she already knows about her own body. The stage dir-
ections declare 'Hic palpat Zelomye Beatam Mariam Virginem' [Here Zelomy
touches the Beautiful Virgin Mary] (226). The Latin *palpare* suggests stroking as
much as touching, and Zelomy offers an intimate portrait of Mary's form:

> A merveyle that nevyr was herd beforn!
> Here opynly I fele and se:
> A fayr chylde of a maydon is born
> And nedyth no waschynge as other don,
> Ful clene and pure forsoth is he,
> Withoutyn spot or ony polucyon,
> His modyr, nott hurte of virgynité.   (227–33)

Zelomy both feels and sees the marvel of a virgin birth. She encounters the 'fayr
chylde' first, and she is stunned by his cleanliness. This newborn, it seems, requires
no 'waschynge'. But Zelomy elaborates on purity that manifests 'Withoutyn spot
or ony polucyon'. Given that 'pollucioun' describes a 'discharge of semen other
than during sexual intercourse', we might suspect that Zelomy is seeking out
evidence of erotic activity.[37] So too does the word 'spot' suggest 'a stain resulting
from intercourse'.[38] These words might initially describe the child, but the final
line transposes this lack of pollution and spots onto 'His modyr', who remains
'nott hurte of virgynité'. It is Mary and her infant's stainless and intact skin that
defies the midwives' expectations of childbirth.[39] Zelomy repeats that 'hyr chylde
clene, as I fyrst sayd — / As other ben, nowth fowle arayd' (237–8). She con-
trasts the word 'fowle', which describes filth, with a 'modyr and chylde' who are
relentlessly 'clene and pure' (239). These lurid descriptions of cleanliness reveal
the midwives' effort to sensorily reproduce and bear witness to Mary's virginity.
However, Zelomy can clock the hormonal signs of pregnancy, and she commands
her audience to 'Beholde the brestys of this clene mayd, / Ful of fayr mylke' while
questioning 'how that thei be' (235–6). Mary once again confuses gendered traits
by mixing signs of pregnancy with those of virginity. Salomé then doubts Mary's
maidenhood itself: 'I cannot beleve — / A mayde mylke have! Never man dyde
se / Ne woman bere chylde withowte grett greve!' (243–5). These phrases imply
that Mary's body is out of sync according to a familiar argument that continues to
invalidate trans women because they do not experience 'grett greve' or labour.[40]

    If Salomé's skepticism is mutually affirmative of trans misogyny in the N-Town
'Nativity', then her ensuing punishment for doubting Mary models a satisfying
retribution against incapable medical providers. Faithless as ever, Salomé refuses
to believe Mary's account of herself without further material proof: 'I shal nevyr

trowe it, but I it preve / With hand towchynge' (246–7). Salomé's demand, here, stresses the invasive nature of 'hand towchynge', which often accompanies what has been benignly rebranded as gender-affirming healthcare today. Mary consents to yet another medical examination, and she invites Salomé to 'Towch with youre hand and wele asay: / Wysely ransake and trye the trewthe owth / Whethyr I be fowlyd or a clene may' (251–3). Consider Mary's shift into the imperative as she adopts Salomé's vile terms and turns them against the midwife. Go ahead, Mary says, 'trye the trewthe owth', touch me again, and see what happens. These lines are significant because Mary, like others subjected to such scrutiny, learns to wield her body as proof of her condition. The following medical examination dramatizes the dangers of doubting another woman's autonomy. The stage directions tell us that 'Hic tangit Salomee Mariam et cum arescerit manus eius' [Here Salomé touches Mary and … her hand has withered] (254). This gynecological exam gone wrong punishes Salomé for her 'grett dowth and fals beleve', and her hand appears not only 'ded' but also 'drye as claye' (255–6). It is satisfying, then, that the N-Town 'Nativity' positions Salomé as a sinner who must beg for forgiveness from her deified patient: 'In grett myscheff now am I pyght. / Alas, alas for my lewdnes!' (264–5). The term 'lewdnes', here, evokes a variety of improprieties, ranging from the inability to read Latin to a lack of training in medicine.[41] This scene remains useful precisely because it stages a revenge plot against incompetent providers of medical care, then and now.

Mary's repeated obstetrical examinations allow us to locate in the medieval past what trans studies scholars have identified as 'the reveal', when a gender variant figure is dramatically exposed for the viewing pleasure of an audience. Colby Gordon, writing in response to Clark and Sponsler's work, describes 'the reveal' as itself a prevalent critical method that assumes 'the only conceivable response to gender nonconformity is a striptease performed under the watchful eye of the scholar'.[42] The midwives in the N-Town 'Nativity' — and, we might add, some critics themselves — demand exactly what Gordon critiques. If the N-Town 'Nativity' offers a longer history of 'the reveal', which tends to rely on the public humiliation of those who are 'fowle, polutyd as other women be', then it also provides us with a different script (303). We can note how Salomé's 'lewdnes' requires the intervention of an angel who offers the midwife a remedy: 'Wurchep that childe that ther is born. / Towch the clothis — ther he is layde' (279–80). Salomé obediently touches the child's cloth and prays for 'mercy for my trespace' (283). Mary understands her child's medical potential as much as she knows her own body, and she emphasizes the renewal of the midwife's dried hand with a lilting rhyme: 'My chyld is medycyn for every sor: / … / Yowre hand ful sone he

wyl restor' (291–3). If Salomé's doubt converts her flesh to clay, then her faith in Mary's condition returns her hand to life. No sooner has Salomé regained sensation than she begins affirming Mary's virginity:

> His modyr, a mayde as sche was beforn,
> Natt fowle, polutyd as other women be,
> But fayr and fresch as rose on thorn,
> Lely-wyte, clene with pure virginyté.   (302–5)

We may be rightfully uncomfortable, here, with Salomé's talk of filth and pollution in contrast to Mary's fairness and freshness. I want to stress, then, that Mary's virginity in a fifteenth-century drama is by no means a direct antecedent to trans femininity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, Mary's declaration of herself as a particular kind of woman and Salomé's coming to believe her does disrupt the familiar operations of trans misogyny in the N-Town 'Nativity'. Listen carefully to the play's conclusion, when Salomé promises: 'Of this grett meracle more knowlege to make, / I shal go telle it in iche place, iwys' (308–9). We can do the same.

That the N-Town 'Nativity' makes visible the distinct and hostile scrutiny of those who are trans feminine is not an abstract or immaterial claim. We need look no further than Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership*, recently published by the Presidential Transition Project. The report begins by lamenting how 'children suffer the toxic normalization of transgenderism with drag queens and pornography invading their school libraries'.[43] Note here how Project 2025 conflates trans femininity with sexually explicit material and suggests that both are 'invading' the sacrosanct school library. The authors of the report continue to associate 'pornography' with the 'omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children … Its purveyors are child predators and misogynistic exploiters of women'.[44] Those who distribute such pornography — which metonymizes gender variance of any kind — 'should be classed as registered sex offenders'.[45] These propositions are disturbing, not least because of their overt trans misogyny. They casually equate trans womanhood with sexual abuse; they deploy the injured woman and child to gain political traction; and, chillingly, they threaten actionable disciplinary measures against trans people themselves. Project 2025 is not alone in making such claims. Throughout 2023, 615 anti-trans bills limiting access to basic healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist have been introduced in the US alone.[46] But these proposed policies are not altogether new. The N-Town 'Nativity' exposes the historical persistence of the *Mandate for Leadership*'s alignment of trans femininity

with forms of sexual violation. Yet this medieval drama also reveals the immense effort required to wipe the Virgin Mary clean of 'spot or ony polucyon', so that she, once again, can be touched for the very first time (232).

Notes

1   A single extant manuscript contains what scholars call the N-Town plays: BL MS Cotton Vespasian D. 8. This composite codex of medieval drama was likely transcribed in the late fifteenth or the early sixteenth century in East Anglia. For a careful manuscript-based study of the N-Town Mary plays, see *The Mary Play from the N. Town Manuscript*, ed. Peter Meredith (London, 1987). For a reproduction of the manuscript itself, see *The N-Town Plays: A Facsimile of British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII*, ed. Peter Meredith and Stanley J. Kahrl (Leeds, 1977).

2   For field-defining accounts of trans misogyny and the specific exposures that accompany trans femininity, see Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Feminism* (Emeryville, 2007); Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Brooklyn, 2024); Gayle Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* (New York, 2018), https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479835911.001.0001; Elías Cosenza Krell, 'Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women of Color?', *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (2017), 226–42, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3815033.

3   Gill-Peterson, *Trans Misogyny*, 19.

4   For the critical uses of sexual opacity in premodern English literature, see Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia, 2016), 1–34, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812291582.

5   There is, of course, no single means of delivering a child, then and now. For a medieval history of surgical approaches to childbirth, see Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, 1990), https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501740480.

6   For overviews of the emerging field of medieval trans studies, see Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Genders from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York, 2021), 1–15, https://doi.org/10.7312/devu19550; Ruth Evans, 'Editor's Introduction: Gender Does Not Equal Genitals', *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 9.2 (2018), 120–31, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-018-0088-0; M.W. Bychowski and Dorothy Kim, 'Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism: An Introduction', *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55.1 (2019), 6–41, https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.2185; Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the*

Middle Ages (Princeton, 2020), 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691210889; Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska, 'Introduction', in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca, 2021), 1–24, https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501759086.001.0001; François·e Charmaille, 'Trans Climates of the European Middle Ages, 500–1300', *Speculum* 98.3 (2023), 695–726, https://doi.org/10.1086/725191; Tess Wingard, 'The Trans Middle Ages: Incorporating Transgender and Intersex Studies into the History of Medieval Sexuality', *English Historical Review* 138, 593 (2023), 933–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cead214; and Aylin Malcolm and Nat Rivkin, 'Introduction: Medieval Trans Natures', *Medieval Ecocriticisms* 4 (2024), 1-15, https://doi.org/10.32773/USYL7779.

7   However, scholars have skillfully applied intersectional queer and feminist theories to late medieval drama in recent years. For crystalline examinations of gender and sexuality at work in early theatre, see Daisy Black, *Play Time; Gender, Anti-Semitism and Temporality in Medieval Biblical Drama* (Manchester, 2020), https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146878; Jeffery G. Stoyanoff, 'Queer and Working Class While Reading *The Second Shepherds' Play*', in *Critical Confessions Now*, ed. Abdulhamit Arvas, Afrodesia McCannon, and Kris Trujillo (Cham, 2022), 73–80, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18508-3_8; Tison Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive* (Toronto, 2021), https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487538866.

8   For dazzling readings of the Virgin Mary to which this article is indebted, see Emma Maggie Solberg, *Virgin Whore* (Ithaca, 2018), 3, https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501730344. All quotations of the N-Town 'Nativity' refer to *The N-Town Plays*, ed. Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo, 2007), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2j6xqp2, and will be cited parenthetically by line numbers.

9   For what little criticism exists on gender variance on the medieval stage, see Robert L.A. Clark and Claire M. Sponsler, 'Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Cross-Dressing in Medieval Drama', *New Literary History* 28 (1997), 319–44, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1997.0017; Meg Twycross, '"Transvestism" in the Mystery Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 5. 2 (1983), 123–80.

10 For careful readings of the N-Town plays on which this article builds, see Theresa Coletti, 'Devotional Iconography in the N-Town Marian Plays', *Comparative Drama* 11.1 (1977), 22–44, https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1977.0002; Penny Granger, *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East Anglia* (Cambridge, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781846157493; Cindy L. Carlson, 'Like a Virgin: Mary and Her Doubters in the N-Town Cycle', in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (St Martin's, 1999),

199–217; William Fitzhenry, 'The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater', *Studies in Philology* 100.1 (2003), 22–43, https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2003.0003.

11   See, for example, Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976) and *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (New York, 2005).

12   For exemplary studies of cis women's virginity in premodern England, see *Medieval Virginities,* ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto, 2003); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2000), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203463819; Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2001); Kathryn Schwarz, 'The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13.2 (2002), 1–34, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-13-2-1.

13   See Jenny C. Mann, 'How to Look at a Hermaphrodite in Early Modern England', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 46.1 (2006), 74, https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2006.0008. For an example of looking under the dress while approaching medieval trans figures, see David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, 'The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.4 (1995), 459–65, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-4-459. Karras has since revised her approach to the Rykener case. See Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, 'John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited', in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Cambridge, 2016), 111–21, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782046196-012.

14   See Beans Velocci, 'Standards of Care: Uncertainty and Risk in Harry Benjamin's Transsexual Classifications', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8.4 (2021), 462–80, 462, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9311060.

15   See Monica Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford, 2008), ix, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199211494.001.0001. For thorough histories of trans medicine, which largely focus on clinics in the United States and Western Europe throughout the past century, see Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis, 2018), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv75d87g; Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (Lincoln, 2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvckq9pv; Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Boston, 2004), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1c7zfrv; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History, Second Edition: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (New York, 2017).

16   See Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis, 2020), 5, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ct-v17mrv14. See also Christoph Hanssmann, *Care Without Pathology: How Trans–Health Activists Are Changing Medicine* (Minneapolis, 2023). For a crucial evaluation of the limitations of mainstream trans histories, see C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, 2017), 139–75, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9781517901721.001.0001.

17   See *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. Monica Green (Philadelphia, 2001), https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812204698; Caroline R. Batten, '"Lazarus, Come Forth": Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Life Course of Early Medieval English Women', in *Early Medieval English Life Courses*, ed. Thijs Porck and Harriet Soper (Boston, 2021), 140–58, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004501867_007; DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*.

18   See DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 134–62. DeVun's work offers a prehistory of feminist science studies, which understands a dimorphic model of assigned sex as both reductive and exclusive. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, 2000).

19   See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, 1999), 1, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382188. While Dinshaw theorizes queer touches across time, this article considers the literal contact involved in trans medical care.

20   Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 5.

21   For the affordances of such narratives, see Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39.2 (2014), 383–406, 400, https://doi.org/10.1086/673088.

22   See *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), s.v. 'incarnacioun', n. 1–2.

23   For an influential history of Aristotelian generation, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: The Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1992), 25–62. For a necessary revision of Laqueur's medical genealogy in the Middle Ages, see DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 102–33.

24   For examples of trans autobiography by two of the genre's more notorious authors, see Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York, 1968); Caitlyn Jenner, *The Secrets of My Life* (New York, 2017).

25   See Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory', 399.

26   See *MED*, s.v. 'stiren', v. 1–3.

27   For an adept reading of the womb in the N-Town plays, see Sara Petrosillo, 'A Microhistory of the Womb from the N-Town Mary Plays to *Gorboduc*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47.1 (2017), 121–46, https://doi.

org/10.1215/10829636-3716602. The term 'side' can refer specifically to the womb. See *MED*, s.v. 'side', n. 2.

28 'Travayle' refers to 'hard physical labor' as well as childbirth. See *MED*, s.v. 'travail', n. 1–3.

29 How childbirth would have been staged remains a mystery. For a performance history of the N-Town plays, see Kenneth M. Cameron and Stanley J. Kahrl, 'Staging the N-Town Cycle', *Theatre Notebook* 21 (1967), 122–65.

30 Velocci, 'Standards of Care', 463.

31 See Malatino, *Trans Care*, 5.

32 See *MED*, s.v. 'cler', adj. 2.

33 See *MED*, s.v. 'werd', n. 1–2.

34 See *MED*, s.v. 'senden', v. 1–2; *MED*, s.v. 'maken', v. 1–2; *MED*, s.v. 'maiden', n. 1–2.

35 Clark and Sponsler, 'Queer Play', 319.

36 See *MED*, s.v. 'tasten', v. 1–3.

37 See *MED*, s.v. 'pollucioun', n. 1.

38 See *MED*, s.v. 'spot', n. 1.

39 These accounts of unmarked skin take on added significance when we remember that Mary was sometimes portrayed as a woman of color in twelfth- through fifteenth-century European art. For scholarly studies of Mary's racialization, see Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London, 1996); Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston, 1993); Lisa Hopkins, '"Black but Beautiful": Othello and the Cult of the Black Madonna', in *Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama*, ed. Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins (Burlington, 2007), 75–86, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315593890-5. For deft examinations of medieval race-making, see Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108381710; Cord Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia, 2019); Wan-Chuan Kao, *White Before Whiteness in the Late Middle Ages* (Manchester, 2024), https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526145819.

40 For a survey of trans-exclusive rhetoric, see Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur, 'Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9.3 (2022), 311–33, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836008.

41 See *MED*, s.v. 'leued', adj. 1–3. For an astute account of lewd speech in medieval England, see Carissa Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501730412.

42 See Colby Gordon, *Glorious Bodies Trans Theology and Renaissance Literature* (Chicago, 2024), 25, https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226835013.001.0001.

43   Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conversa-
     tive Promise* (Washington DC, 2023), 1, https://www.project2025.org/policy/.
44   Ibid, 5.
45   Ibid.
46   '2023 anti-trans legislation', Trans Legislation Tracker, last updated 30 August 2024,
     https://translegislation.com/bills/2023.