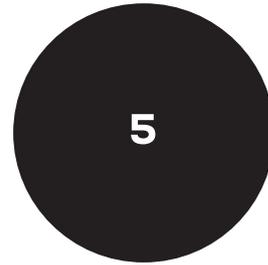




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Angela Bennett Segler

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Angela Bennett Segler

Picturing Queer Desire in the Vernon Manuscript

Buried within the voluptuous folds of the Vernon Manuscript, on the recto (front) side of folio 126, there is a surprising image: of not merely two persons engaged in an explicit sex act (something that is surprisingly common even in religious manuscripts¹), but two male monastics in bed. This image is a rupture within the orthodoxy otherwise prevalent throughout the Vernon. Not only does it subvert the narrative to which it is attached—which is about a monk who has sex with a nun and is brought to compunction by a miracle of the Virgin Mary—it also subverts the heteronormative moral of the miracle genre altogether, implicating any reader of this particular tale and image in a queer desire akin to the one pictured. To put this anomaly in context, allow me to first put the Vernon, its contents, and the Miracles of the Virgin, including this particular narrative, in context.

The Vernon Manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng.Poet.a.1 (**V**), is the largest and most important Middle English manuscript in existence, with over 370 different texts on 422-426 leaves measuring 544x393mm, made of 211-13 calf skins, and weighing some twenty-two kilograms.² Not only does it contain an entire library of religious literature, prayers, exempla, and contemplative works and lyrics, but it was carefully produced, copied, and decorated over many years³ in the last decade of the fourteenth century alongside a sister volume of similar but less lavish content and decoration, the Simeon manuscript.⁴ These two manuscripts are “monumental compendia of vernacular literature, utterly anomalous in their scale and ambition among English vernacular books of the later Middle Ages.”⁵

While neither vernacular religious work nor the collection of a multiplicity of vernacular works in a single volume was unusual in this period,⁶ the decoration in **V** is highly atypical for a vernacular book, even one intended for luxury. Decorated book production in the late fourteenth century consisted mainly of Books of Hours, Psalters, Missals, and Bibles.⁷ What makes the Vernon so unexpected and unique, then, is its combination of Middle English vernacular religious texts with a kind of luxury production and decoration not seen in any other late Middle English codex. Moreover, **V** was not just decorated, but also illustrated in four separate places, two of which include cycles of miniatures in the *Estorie del Evangelie* and the

Miracles, an even more unusual phenomenon for vernacular works, particularly given that such a lavish book was not for wealthy patrons, but for a house of female religious.⁸

Despite its anomalous instantiation, *V* exhibits an anxiety over orthodoxy that extends beyond its monastic production and destination. Several scholars have commented on the way in which the texts themselves reflect a general impulse in the late fourteenth century to produce works of vernacular religion that educate a lay public just enough to reify orthodox spiritual knowledge and resist and contend with heresy, but without allowing the laity access to sacred text itself, which was a central tenet in the debates over the Lollard heresy.⁹ Furthermore, both Thomas Heffernan and Ryan Perry's readings of *V*'s homiletic material identify the impetus behind the Vernon's creation as being one that showcases the values of a "resurgent orthodoxy under siege"¹⁰ from Lollardy.

Indeed, even the *Miracles of the Virgin* themselves participate in a sacramental economy central to the orthodox schema under attack by Lollard accusations. In particular, the *Miracles*' focus on the corporeality of Christ is underpinned by the body and breast of Mary and their relationship to the Eucharist. Caroline Walker Bynum outlines the Virgin's relationship to the sacrament by pointing out that the woman's body is both metaphorically and literally food, and that the Virgin's body in particular produced both physical and spiritual food by giving birth to Christ and nursing him at her breast.¹¹ Christ is similarly figured as a lactating mother, holding his breast as it "secretes" the spiritual nourishment of his blood in a visual parallel to Mary holding her lactating breasts.¹² In late Medieval art both Christ and Mary are depicted in this breast-proffering posture, spurting their fluids directly into the mouths of monks or into the chalice used for the Eucharist.

The Vernon's visual emphasis on Marian miracles, then, helps us to understand the manuscript as an object aiming to facilitate female piety and contemplation. The Virgin here provides access to the bodily Christ because of her shared single bodily substance with the incarnate God.¹³ Mary's milk is Christ's blood, and her body is the reminder of and stand-in for Christ's corporeal existence.¹⁴ In fact, the Virgin and Christ are often paired as the beginning and end of Christ's life cycle,¹⁵ which actually makes the Life of Christ illuminations in the *Estorie*¹⁶ and the *Miracles* perfect bookends for the devotional section¹⁷ of Vernon that may once have been intended to be the beginning of the manuscript.¹⁸ Moreover, the inclusion of the

Marian miracles, which were themselves uncommon¹⁹ and rarely illustrated (and even less often illustrated for each individual story) helps us to see the overall orientation toward devotion to the corporeality of Christ through Mary's flesh—not uncommon in the late Middle Ages—and just how unusual the Vernon's choice to include this aspect in this particular way is. Vernon's original 41 illustrated Marian miracles were completely unprecedented in both their textual and visual undertakings.

As a group, the surviving nine *Miracles* portray scenes in which bodies and souls are saved by the Virgin's intervention. In many of them, these bodies are defended against the threat of unorthodox infiltration. Their illustrative schema rather unusually highlights the making visible of Mary's transformative power through their unorthodox depiction of sequence. This is unusual both for the Vernon—Illustrator B did not illustrate any of V's other miniatures—and for Marian depictions in general, because they convey "continuous narrative—the visual playing-out of the events described in each miracle—[by] juxtapos[ing multiple scenes from each narrative] within the limited, single-column space in a dynamic and lively configuration that routinely extends not only into the frame...but into the margins and intercolumnar spaces as well."²⁰ Indeed, as Alison Stones' complete catalogue of the Vernon images and their possible artistic parallels points out, only one of the miniatures has a full parallel or tradition.²¹ The rest have either a partial tradition²² or no visual tradition whatsoever.²³ Indeed, not only does the image completely lack an English and art historical tradition to which it belongs, the miracle it accompanies has almost no literary tradition either.



Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1 fol. 126rc Illustration for Marian Miracle called in the Vernon's index "Of a prest þat lay by a nonne." (fol. ivb)

The miniature and tale on 126r is thus an unusual illustration of an unusual Marian miracle, unusually written in Middle English. Even the tale of the "prest þat lay by a nonne" is only attested in one other place.²⁴ It is, however, a generically standard "Miracle" story in which a priest, who was "wylde of dede" [wild of deed] is unable to confess his sins, thus endangering his post-Lateran soul as he falls deathly ill.²⁵ He prays devoutly to the Virgin, who at last wills that he should cleanse his conscience. He is then able to make confession to a trusted priestly friend whom he begs to

“þenken on him among/his masse and his almes ded” [think on him during/ his mass and as he did his alms] just as he dies. His prompt death upon the promise of his fellow is, however, no guarantee of his salvation, because he dies without having taken the Eucharist with a clean conscience. Nonetheless, the Virgin has intervened for him whilst he was in purgatory, and because of the priest’s diligence in “sacryng In memento” [sanctifying (the host) in memory (of his departed fellow)], she appears to the living priest and directs him to turn and find the dead priest behind him and waiting to be given the sacrament. The priest “hoselde him deuoutli” [devoutly administered the sacrament to him] and afterward saw the Virgin “Come a doun of þat Auler/ And take his felawe bi þe honde/ Oute of þe churche forte fonde” [come down off the altar/ and take his fellow by the hand/ out of the church and depart henceforth].

The tale is a straightforward narrative of a devotee to the Virgin being saved by Mary herself intervening in the sacramental process that brings one’s soul into right relation with God. The image, however, emphatically does *not* display a priest who has “had his way” with a nun. We do see a sequence of three narrative events that should be familiar from the *Miracle* text itself, starting in the top left corner where the priest does his deed in bed, and reading left to right to the scene of the Virgin (and child) appearing on the altar during the second priest’s celebration of the mass (note the chalice on the altar that positionally links the body of Christ through the child and the Virgin along a vertical axis), to a final scene that moves from the scene at right to the lower left. Here, the celebrating priest has turned around from the altar and is placing the sacrament in the mouth of the penitent priest while the Virgin places her hand on the kneeling priest’s shoulders.

In each scene, we find a significant change from the narrative’s version of the story. First, and perhaps most stunningly, the nun has been exchanged for a young monk, whom we recognize as such from his tonsure.²⁶ The second distinct change from the narrative is that the Virgin does not appear by herself, but with the Christ child in her arms, foregrounding the connection between Mary and the body of Christ. Finally, in the narrative, the Virgin does not come down from the altar until after the priest has been administered the sacrament, at which point she takes him by the hand and leads him out of the church, presumably up to heaven. Here, instead, we see she is not on the altar during his sacrament, but standing behind him, even touching him, as if to guarantee that *this* priest, who has had sex with male

monastics, take only the sanctioned pleasure in having God's body in his mouth. Hers is a heteronormative touch, guaranteeing not only the holiness of any pleasure the priest may encounter, but also its acceptable direction toward and channeling through the body of a woman.²⁷ Indeed, her regulatory presence is implicitly understood, as the Virgin Mary is commonly figured as the guarantor of monastic chastity.²⁸

This focus on Mary and the incarnate Christ necessarily links to a Eucharistic devotion that expresses the wholeness and inviolability of Christ's body. Hence the *V Miracles'* anxiety over Jews destroying Christian bodies can actually point us to a more present perceived threat in Lollards,²⁹ whose opposition to both the doctrine of transubstantiation and the necessity of Marian intervention in the late fourteenth century threatens to rend the congregational body of Christ. As Adrienne Boyarin points out, after the 1290 Edict of Expulsion, there were no longer any Jews in England, though images of Jews continued to be invoked. Boyarin thus contends that the figure of the Jew in Marian Miracles comes to represent the other extra-orthodox figure in Late Medieval England: the Lollard.³⁰

Lollardy was the English heresy, a decentralized community emerging in the late fourteenth century that resisted corruption in the church, advocated for lay access to scripture, and contested most forms of priestly mediation, including the requirement of the sacraments for salvation. Further, Lollardy is linked with accusations of sodomy in both Lollard complaints against the church and in orthodox responses to the heresy.³¹ While accusations, let alone the practice, of sodomy were infrequent, they were nonetheless persistent. Sodomy, which loosely tends to refer to all non-procreative sex in the late Middle Ages, is branded "contrary to nature" because it leads to the expenditure of seed by which a human being could be formed. Lollards further contend that institutional corruption led to the expenditure of spiritual seed by which "spiritual generation" in Christ could be propagated, linking physical sexual acts with institutionalized clerical malpractice.³² We might wonder if the sodomy pictured in the miniature is linked to the potential for a *spiritual sodomy* with Christ, by which the penetration of Christ into the body of the believer would not generate a saved soul but a depraved one.

But to determine exactly what this image is communicating, we might first ask how such an image came to be in such a place and what Illustrator B, the artist of the *Miracles* miniatures, could have been doing by producing such a queer image.

Given the Cistercian identifications of the manuscript through its images of Cistercian monks and textual parallels to Cistercian John Northwood's manuscript, we must consider whether the artists working on **V** may have been monks. Most of the extant scholarship on **V** tends to identify both the artists and scribes as professionals—meaning lay persons—hired by monastic patrons or proxies to execute the work, based upon the identification of *some* known professionals at work in the Vernon and Simeon and the very high quality of both copying and artwork. I would argue, however, that the material circumstances of such a large undertaking of manuscript production preclude the professional hypothesis.

If we take the scribes as an example, we can see how itinerant professionals may have interacted with stable monastic artisans. All of Vernon was executed by two scribes. Scribe B copied the bulk of the work while Scribe A executed the Table of Contents and the remainder of the first quire, as well as most of the rubrics and foliation throughout. Scribe A was most certainly working after B, and was likely acting in a supervisory and finishing role.³³ Scribe B, unlike A, cannot be positively identified in any other documents or codices, and I would contend that his "regularity of duct and aspect"³⁴ across all 1050³⁵ pages he copied with very few mistakes or corrections, as well as the four to (more likely) eight years he spent copying at the rate of one page per day, makes it more probable that B was a monk carefully and deliberately executing this labor inside the scriptorium or house where the manuscript's production has been located. His slightly outdated *anglicana* bookhand³⁶ combined with its regularity and care leads me to conclude that Scribe B was a middle- to old-aged monk who had been trained in the mid-fourteenth century and was likely one of the chief internal scribes at the Cistercian production center, where he also resided.³⁷

If we take the scribes as an analogue, then, we may be able to understand how Lynda Dennyson's identification of Artist D as the professional Holkham Psalter Artist, who "initiated and planned" the entire illumination program of **V**, and the inability to identify the other artists of **V** in any other work points to the other artists' being local to Lichfield Cathedral.³⁸ If the secondary and tertiary artists of **V**, then, can be identified as part of the same production center as Scribe B, they might indeed be Cistercians completing the program laid out by Artist D, after Scribe B has completed pages. These local monastics would, of course, exhibit differing artistic skill levels and duties according to their experience in the

scriptorium.³⁹ Thus, while much of the planning, design, and finishing may have been executed by professionals who returned to the cathedral to check in, the majority of the most painstaking work would, I argue, have been done by monks at Lichfield.

If, then, Illustrator B was a monk, what is he doing replacing the nun in the image with a monk? We might first wonder if he was painting himself into the role of the priest who is miraculously saved from his sin through the Virgin's compassion. In which case, we might read him confessing himself as a monk "wyld of lyf" who has done great service to the Virgin, even in inscribing these very miniatures, because he is instantiating, nay incarnating both Virgin and son as part of a devotional ethos central to monastic book production.⁴⁰ Making a "clene" confession on the flesh of the page may be an expression of his contrition over the act that has distanced him from God and to which he has not been able to fully confess to another priest. If we consider the sacramentality of manuscript inscription, the way that it makes visible something invisible through a special ritual,⁴¹ we might comprehend the making of such an image as a sacramental sublimation, a substitution of one making manifest or material instantiation (book-making) for another (confession). Without directly conversing with another priest, the artist nevertheless fulfills the conditions for a full confession according to contemporary penitential literature:⁴² he enumerates his sin, makes every aspect of it visible, legible to the eyes of another ordained religious who then has the power to absolve him of his sin, or at the very least, in accordance with the logic of the story, remember him in masses and prayers so that the Virgin may intervene on his behalf.

There is only one problem with this hypothesis: the priest who undergoes his transformation in the images is distinctly *not* a Cistercian. If we accept the attribution of the manuscript to Cistercians, then we must ask ourselves why this is the only monk-like personage who does not appear in a Cistercian habit. He is clean-shaven, like the other monks, and doesn't wear the liturgical robes of the celebrant, nor does he appear like the gray-bearded bishops depicted in two of the miniatures. If Illustrator B was a local Cistercian monk, what do we make of this man in another habit? Particularly in this habit that could be representative of Benedictines but also potentially of a non-specific religious identity? What is important to note, though, is that the habit is distinctly *not* one of either orders of

peripatetic friars who would have been in England at the time. The figure must instead be either secular clergy or a monk of stable abode. That means his bed partner could be *either* a brother of the same order *or* a monk the priest encountered as he executed priestly duties or those of a monastic outrider.⁴³

Which leaves us with the naked monk in bed. He is certainly an avowed religious, which we know from his tonsure. If we contemplate that our Cistercian artist has painted himself into *this* monk, whose order is unidentifiable due to his complete lack of habit, it shifts the mode of our analysis. He may still be making confession, but one that is not necessarily part of the economy of contrition, sacrament, and reconciliation, as he is nowhere pictured as participating in that economy. Most importantly, he does not paint himself as *inactive* either. Indeed, what we see here rather clearly is that the heterosexist framework, which would require the nun of the story to be a passive “victim” of the “active” priest’s advances, is not translated onto the pair of male bodies, making one an active and another a passive partner. Instead, our “bottom” here faces his lover on top, and rather than be shown as explicitly or implicitly penetrated, we see him being the “active” partner, reaching down to the priest’s groin while he is on top of him. In which case, perhaps this image is not so much a confession of the monk’s past sins as it is a projection of his desires, or of possible desires of monks, realized or not, and particularly his homosexual desire that does not fit neatly into the heterosexist paradigm of feminized monastics being victimized by “wyld” but masculine clerics acting out suppressed heterosexual desires with inappropriate partners.

The clear rejection of the heterosexist framework for homosexual acts brings us back to the accusations of Lollards, since it is only in the Lollard construction of sodomy that desire operates via mutual interaction between men, while the orthodox depictions and deployments of sodomy re-inscribe a heterosexist set of binaries—masculine/feminine and active/passive—on it. According to the Lollard Third Conclusion, it is the lack of women combined with a rich diet that causes sodomy. The excess of substances going into the body must physiologically lead to an excess of substance needing to leave the body, even in the form of ejaculate.⁴⁴ The danger is one to which all monastics are equally subject, which is why the author of the *Twelve Conclusions* argues for abolishing the mandates of celibacy for priests, as well as for a reformation of spending and living habits of those

ordained.⁴⁵ For Lollards, monastic sodomy is an inevitability given the conditions of fourteenth-century claustration.

Despite the lack of feminization of one partner or another in Lollard writings, we do find that the sodomite is a somewhat stable category in the Lollard accusation, as the *Twelve Conclusions* suggest that those who commit sodomy are men who “like non wymmen” and who can be proved to be such by a secret test that marks the man with those desires.⁴⁶ That is, the way to prove a sodomite is to prove that he’s had sex with no women, which, incidentally, is also the condition for properly enacting the vows of monasticism. Thus, monasticism is collapsed into sodomy in this accusation, and any attempt a monk might make to defend himself against charges of incontinence would only further reinforce his status as “one of tho” sodomites who “like non wymmen.” Given the equation of monasticism with sodomy in Lollard accusations, we might pause to wonder about the other possible identity for our artist. Perhaps he is indeed a lay professional working for monastic patrons. If so, perhaps rather than one of the monks in the image expressing something about the artist, they both express something about the artist’s understanding of monasticism. Is this a visual accusation of monastic sodomy? Is it a depiction of an actual event, one the artist may have witnessed? Perhaps the monk’s different habit is a move made out of respect for the Cistercians for whom the artist was working, or in order to identify sodomitical monastics as someone else, or specifically as Benedictines whom the artist may have encountered as he traveled his Benedictine circuit along the London–Norwich axis that Lynda Dennison outlines.⁴⁷

Rather than the Virgin guaranteeing monastic chastity, as Roger Dymmok argues she does in his response to Lollard accusations of monastic sodomy, she is now an indicator of the threat itself.⁴⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw points out that the link between anxieties over sodomy and anxieties over the Eucharist is indicative of a general Lollard anxiety over the legibility of bodies altogether.⁴⁹ Their problem with the Eucharist is its transformation from bread into body at the words of a priest, a transformation that is not sensible through any bodily means, but through the “sacryng” enacted by the priest.

The orthodox defense of the sacrament, as outlined by Dymmok, dwells on the “concept of invisible effects of acts–sacraments, but also other kinds of acts as well–on bodies.”⁵⁰ Indeed, it is this invisible effect, this sacramentality, that

underpins most of the Marian miracles illustrated here. The transformation of this priest happened from within and changed his material circumstances and outcomes through the enactment of two sacraments. But perhaps it is this orthodox enactment of sacraments that is at the heart of the Lollard critique of them. Late Medieval Carthusian Nicholas Love, for instance, describes the way in which he experiences the bodily touch of Christ in the host as a “delectable paradise” into which he is pitched when he is touched by “*pe touchere oure lord Jesu*” in the momentary encounter with the “*humanitas Christi*” that was an ordained ecstatic and erotic interaction.⁵¹ The celebration of the Eucharist was designed to lead one to feel “fused ‘body to body’ with Christ”⁵² in an openly and permissibly homoerotic encounter.⁵³ Moreover, as the Eucharist and its attendant doctrine of transubstantiation became the “central mystery of the faith,” it threatened to displace the “heterosexual” core of the Incarnation in a way that troubled orthodox and heretics alike. Dyan Elliot argues that within the church’s institutions, monastic purity became increasingly necessary to guarantee that the “male handling of the male body” in the sacrament will be “unproblematic.”⁵⁴

The Lollard response to the unknowability of the status of monastic bodies and the invisible changes they supposedly brought about are underlined by a clear desire for legibility staked in material continuity. Not only are the bodies of sodomites marked and stable as such, but bread is marked, knowable, and stable as such. It does not transform into a body, or any part thereof, but maintains itself as bread. Yet, even the insistence on material continuity is haunted by the queer potential of the sacrament in its mere consumption. As Bynum has shown, the erotics of food and the Eucharist have, at this point, been long established, particularly in writers of the Cistercian tradition like Bernard of Clairvaux, who writes about the pleasure of having God enter into him in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Bynum writes that union with God was a bodily pleasure of a “feeling/knowing [of] God into which the entire person was caught up.”⁵⁵ The communicant, then, may indeed feel pleasure as God enters into, penetrates, his/her body through the mouth, plunges into his/her depths and gets absorbed into the communicant’s being from the inside out. The Lollard insistence on material continuity, however, reveals one final anxiety over the body of God entering someone’s mouth, as we see in Margery Baxter’s defense of her position on the sacrament. She indicates that it cannot possibly be holy, or the actual body of God because then the body of God would also be shit out and still present in all the stinking latrines where priests and

congregants, indeed the entire collective church, relieve themselves of food matter.⁵⁶ The absurdity of claiming that God is a pile of shit—or at least in piles of shit—is of course, as Dinshaw points out, related back to the eating and purging cycle implicated in accusations of sodomy.⁵⁷ I would posit in addition, though, that Baxter's account reveals anxiety over the inevitable anality of Christ in the body if he is consumed as food. Not only does his body become shit—a sacrilegious juxtaposition of clean and unclean—but it might be enjoyed just as much coming out as he was going in.

Yet, the artist's potential Lollard identification does not clear him of the accusation of sodomy himself, since, as Dinshaw highlights, these accusations were flung in both directions. It merely implicates him in the anxieties that were being felt and enacted on both sides of orthodoxy. In twenty-first century terms, we might say that the Lollard watches a man take another man into his mouth and pass through his body and anus, and enjoy that as the height of both bodily and spiritual pleasure. He identifies that pleasure, possibly by recognizing the potential to experience it as such himself, and then points to the priest or monk enjoying such pleasure with a barbed, "that's gay."

What we see when we try to read the bodies of its maker in the image, then, is its complete irreducibility to any one meaning. If we consider the artist to have been a monk, he may have been pointing to a real event or a desire, confessing it as well as (re-)enacting it on the flesh of the parchment page as he instantiated it, and even pointing to his own need for the Virgin's intervention and heteronormative touch to guarantee his unpolluted enjoyment of—and purifying by—the body of her son. If we consider him to have been a lay professional expressing anxieties over the sodomitical potential of monasticism and the Eucharist, we also have to consider his proximity to such events and his implication in sacramentally realizing in the flesh the very sodomy he seems to fear. In the same moment that he makes clerical and Eucharistic sodomy legible to viewers as problematic, he also expresses the potential of a non-heterosexual desire, even as he concretely instantiates it in parchment. Thus, the image opens either heretical or queer readings, which end up being nearly the same thing in the late fourteenth century.

But wait. We have one final point of view to consider, which is that of the reader: the *female* monastic or quasi-religious reader for whom this volume was probably made. If we consider the image being made *for women* as the most salient point in

its explanation, rather than its being made *by men*, does that not resolve all our difficulties? Is it not perfectly orthodox and unproblematic for women to be aroused by the Eucharist?⁵⁸ Bynum writes that Eucharistic ecstasy was especially powerful for women, whose access to the body in the host was curtailed because of their status as the morally weaker sex. Moreover, identification with the Virgin, who is figured as bearing her breasts for the benefit of others, was not so much a sublimation of desire, but a model for females to emulate for appropriately experiencing Christ's penetrative presence.⁵⁹

Here, however, these male religious are problematically not reproducing a hetero-framed sodomy. Without a penetrated male, the image instead displays an alternative to the active/passive binary, one that may be dangerously suggestive of other options to women. Interestingly, amid all the accusations of sodomy that men leveled at each other from positions of orthodoxy and heresy, both sides are "virtually indistinguishable" on the issue of female-female sex.⁶⁰ The warning against female "sodomy" in the *Twelve Conclusions* reduces the female expression of sexuality—either in action with themselves, animals, inanimate objects, or even with each other—to an "undifferentiated urge for penetration."⁶¹ Feminine desire is contingent upon passivity and is activated by the presence of a phallus. Even in cases of female-female sex, one woman is portrayed as having an enlarged "member" (clitoris) that then acts as a penetrative apparatus for the other woman; she "assume[s the] active function herself," making her enactment of her desires not merely homosexual but also transgender. The corrective to these women's "wandering desires" is a redirection toward men, particularly in marriage, because the possibility of "female-female desire is unknown in an androcentric culture, the kind of culture inhabited by Lollards and orthodox alike."⁶²

However, what this image provides, regardless of the orthodoxy of its generator or gender of readership, is a suggestion of sexual pleasure that is explicitly *not penetrative* but still participates in the Eucharistic economy of erotic union with Christ. It suggests a whole host of other non-procreative desires and acts, acts which "are not themselves fully self-identical or self-apparent,"⁶³ but are contingent upon available gender categories and expressions of desire. What makes this image queer is the fact that it opens up the potentials of *both* same-sex desire outside a reductive heterosexist framework *and* unsanctioned sexual enjoyment of the Eucharist that may be simultaneously "polluted" and redemptive.

Finally, what the image begs of us, its viewers, regardless of our location in time, is to consider its role in reproducing that queer and possibly heretical desire for the body of Christ even as we touch the pages of the book itself. Christ's figuration as a book in the late Middle Ages is wide-spread.⁶⁴ He was literally the *logos* that became flesh, and was often figured as a codex of parchment of stretched across the cross with redemption etched into his flesh in inky blood applied by inscribing instruments. Even the handling of this book, the instantiation in flesh of the corporeal doctrine of late medieval religiosity, was akin to a handling of the body of Christ. Indeed, it is likely to have been the only handling a nun would have been allowed to do. Thus the materiality of this image of God made flesh requires us to think about its bodily implications as well as its visual and textual ones.

The connection between Mary's bodiliness, Christ's incarnation, her milk and his blood, and the Eucharist are made material in the superposition of this image on top of that depicting the cure of the sick monk through Mary's breast milk. The latter is almost directly behind the former, on the verso side of the flesh in which this Eucharistic sexuality is realized, and is visible through the membrane. In real space, in real flesh, the squirting Virgin is in the same place as the queer monks and Eucharist. She shares a space, a flesh even, in which three monks are in bed, being watched by two other monks. One monk is being fed, food litters the floor, and the Eucharist is administered by a priest whose robes match the linens in both beds. A gastro-sexual mystical orgy in the flesh. While I am certainly not arguing that this conjoining of bodies was strictly intentional *per se*, it is felicitous, and I would contend that its juxtaposed felicity and the fact that one image follows the other in narrative sequence would have been an open invitation to the medieval reader to contemplate a range of material-discursive polysemy.⁶⁵ For religious readers of the time, the master Author was always God, and men and women mere instruments of his inscription. Thus the felicity of the two images sharing a single flesh would be loaded with significance beyond any individual's intention by the sacramentality of the process of inscription itself.



Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1 fol. 126r with image from the verso clearly visible in the parchment.

Lest you think that this is an over-reading of the book itself, I'd like to conclude by pointing to the rubric of identification that the Third Lollard Conclusion uses to indicate men/monks with sodomitical/monastic desires: in Middle English, the injunction reads "mark him wel," but in the original Latin it is "*Nota eum bene*."⁶⁶ "*Nota bene*" is the most common way for a reader to annotate a manuscript, and it is used throughout **V**. It serves as a reminder of something one read and found useful or important, not only so that the reader can return to it, but also so that future readers can mark this spot. "*Nota id bene*." NB, as it was commonly abbreviated, was both an injunction to mark and a mark well made. It was an indication that the marks to which it points in the body of the text, often literally with a marginal manicule, were well made, and it was an enactment of good marking, or reading well by marking. The Lollard Conclusion, then, advocates annotating the sodomite's body like a book at the same time as it implies that marking a sodomite's body is a mark well made. The making of a sodomite, then, whether it is done by producing an image of him in flesh or by engaging in a sex act with him, is a mark well made.

The analogue between making/marking books and bodies by instantiating and enacting desires for bodies and their touch is precisely why this image queers the entire Vernon codex. What was intended by the makers of the codex, or what the most orthodox of readers might have interpreted of the image's sexual message, matters less than the fact that the unknowability of either opens up a space of possibility for queer interpretation that may have been available to medieval writers and readers, and is certainly available to post-medieval ones. By injecting uncertainty into its exploration of priestly, monastic, divine, and codex bodies, the image itself opens up a number of queer human and non-human potentials for the enactment of a multiplicity of desires within and for a number of different fleshs.



Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1 fol. 126va Illustration for Marian Miracle called in the Vernon's index "Hou vre lady 3af mylk of heore pappes to a man þat hadd þe squynacye." (fol. ivb)

Footnotes

1 For some of the strange and more scandalous images in illuminated religious manuscripts, see Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Kathryn Ann Smith Art, *Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) or Pamela Porter *Courtly Love in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

2 A.I. Doyle "Codicology, Paleography, and Provenance," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript: The Production and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a. 1*, ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout, BE: Brepols Publishers, 2013), 7.

3 A.I. Doyle, "Introduction," in *The Vernon Manuscript: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford MS. Eng. poet. a. 1, with an introduction by A. I. Doyle* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), 9.

4 London, British Library Additional MS 22283.

5 Ryan Perry, "Editorial Politics in the Vernon Manuscript," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, 71.

6 In fact, **V** has direct parallels in both its contents and organization to London, British Library MS Additional 37787, John Northwood's small volume of devotional verse and prose. See A.I. Doyle, "Codicology," 17. Additionally, it may be participating in what Scase denominates a "new fashion for large format vernacular luxury books" in England led by patrons and bibliophiles. "Some Vernon Analogues and their Patrons," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, 260.

7 Rebecca Farnham, "Border Artists of the Vernon Manuscript," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, 127. Farnham points out that there are, of course, other decorated vernacular works, such as the Auchinleck Manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1) and Göttingen, Universitätsbibliothek, MS Theol. 107r, but these are much more modest in scale and their contents differ significantly from those in **V**.

8 A.I. Doyle uses a comparison to other similar contemporary vernacular volumes on "Sowlehele" [Soul health] from all over Europe to suggest that **V** too would have been for nuns or other religious women. "Codicology," 16.

9 This is N.F. Blake's argument about the contents of the Vernon in particular in "Vernon Manuscript: Contents and Organization," in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990). Thomas J. Heffernan in "Orthodoxies Redux: The Northern Homily Cycle in the Vernon Manuscript and its Textual Affiliations" in the same volume and Ryan Perry's work in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript* point to different evidence to make the same argument. For more general information on the explosion of vernacular theology in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and its relationship to the Lollard heresy, see Alastair Minnis' *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature: Valuing the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Vincent Gillespie's essay "Vernacular Theology" in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Nicholas Watson's "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70.4 (1995): 822-864.

10 "Orthodoxies Redux," 79. See also "Editorial Politics," 71.

11 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

12 See both Caroline Walker Bynum, "Woman as Body and as Food" in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 260-76 and eadem, "Jesus as Mother" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 110-69.

13 Miri Rubi, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 204.

14 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

15 Rubin, 201, 209.

16 Four of the remaining seven miniatures on the single folio of the *Estorie* that survives extend through the gospel stories of Christ's nativity include Mary.

17 Of the twenty-three prayers or fragments on folios 114 through 124, seven are prayers to Mary, six are prayers to Christ that are especially focused on his crucifixion and wounds, while only ten are to the "Lord," "God," or a creator. That means thirteen of twenty-three focus on the same themes that Mary signifies.

More importantly, though, the seven prayers to Mary take up the majority of the folios in the section between the *Estorie* and the *Miracles*, occupying 42 full columns or about fourteen of the folios while the prayers to Christ and God combined occupy only 17 columns or six folios'-worth.

18 *Facsimile*, 6.

19 Despite their popularity in both Latin and vernaculars, Marian miracles were not collected in large quantities in English and never appeared as the sole text of a book until Wynkyn de Worde's 1496 printed edition, and were never illustrated. Adrienne Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).

20 Alison Stones, "The Miniatures in the Vernon Manuscript," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, 152.

21 The Jewish Boy of Bourges can be found depicted similarly in both the *Vies des pères* and Guatier's *Miracles*. Stones, 162.

22 "The Harlot of Rome Saved by Prayer," "The Amputated Leg Healed," "The Sick Monk Cured by the Virgin's Milk" and "The Drowned Sacristan Revived" all have some partial parallels, but each shows only a portion of what **V** shows. Stones, 161, 164, 165, 167.

23 The other miniatures with no artistic tradition include the first one of Rollo and the saving of the city of Crotey; the "Child in Paris Killed by Jews," by far the most extensive narrative with five separate narrative elements; and the unusual tale of "Abraham and the Money Chest." Stones, 154, 159, 165.

24 According to Carol M. Meale, it is found in the early fourteenth-century Queen Mary Psalter, London, British Library, Royal MS 2 B.vii. "The Miracles of Our Lady: Context and Interpretation," in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, 126.

25 After the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the sacraments of confession and communion were absolutely necessary for the salvation of the soul. The penitent must make a complete confession and show contrition before taking the mass, and only then has he or she performed the ritual adequately.

26 Scase uses the presence of a beard on the kneeling figure on fol. 265r to argue that he is not a monk but a hermit, saying that monks are usually clean

shaven, but the artist for that miniature is distinctly not the same as Illustrator B, whose many bearded figures include bishops, Jews, a hermit, secular men, and one monk who all have different beards, in addition to the more typically clean shaven Cistercians, priests, and monks. The presence of the light beard on the one monk may well serve to identify him more with the secular figures than with the other clean-shaven monks.

27 Scase is the only scholar to have ever addressed this miniature in anything more than passing remarks. In her one paragraph reading of this miniature, she contends that the image does not depict two men engaged in a sex act, but the dying priest confessing to his friend on his deathbed. Such a reading, however, requires us to assume a change of clothes for the actors, which happens in no other miniature, as well as a misreading of the narrative, which the artist does not do anywhere else.

28 Roger Dymmok, for instance, uses the common image of the Virgin as institutor of the vow of chastity on which monastic chastity was based to argue that chastity is both possible and supported by the Virgin herself in his response to the Lollard conclusions in: Roger Dymmok, *Liber contra duodecim errores et hereses Lollardorum*, ed. H.S. Cronin (London: Wyclif Society, 1922). See Carolyn Dinshaw's summary and transliteration of Dymmok's work in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 94-97.

29 See both Adrienne Boyarin's *Miracles of the Virgin* and Anthony Bale's *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500* (Cambridge, 2006).

30 Boyarin, 154.

31 See Carolyn Dinshaw's chapter "It Takes One to Know One: Lollards, Sodomites, and their Accusers," in *Getting Medieval*, 55-99.

32 Dinshaw, 62.

33 Simon Horobin points out that Scribe A was likely doing the same thing in Trinity MS 16B in his essay "The Scribes of the Vernon Manuscript," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, 45.

34 Horobin, 35.

35 Doyle, "Codicology," 6.

36 Ibidem, 8. Moreover, the hand bears "no traces of influence from the secretary script that began to be adopted in English hands towards the end of the fourteenth century," Horobin, 35. I would also add that the lack of secretary features may point as much to B not being a professional or documentary scribe as it does to the early date of his hand.

37 Horobin narrows down Lichfield Cathedral as the likely center of production based on Doyle's Cistercian identification, the linguistic markers from the West Midlands, and the size of the house necessary to support such an expensive undertaking.

38 I would add that it is particularly conspicuous that Illustrator B, about whom we are talking, has such an unusual style that he would be identifiable if his work had occurred elsewhere. Lynda Dennison, "The Artistic Origins of the Vernon Manuscript," in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*.

39 Differing degrees of competency are often used to argue that the better illustrations (and even copying) are being done by professionals and the lesser being done by monks. This, however assumes that the house enlisted to execute the patron's orders would not have had the capacity to execute it and that the itinerant professionals working on the book might have had better commissions elsewhere. I find the concatenation of these assumptions, necessary for saying that the good work was not done by monastics, to be less than compelling.

40 See Michael Sargent's work on Carthusian copying, in "The Transmission by the English Carthusians of some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976) and Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1982).

41 This is based on Hugh of Saint Victor's definition of a Sacrament in *De Sacramentis*.

42 See, for instance, Pierre Payer's *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession, 1150–1300* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1993).

43 By this point, monastic outriders are rather infamous for their less than discreet lifestyles outside the monasteries. See, for instance, Chaucer's monk in the *Canterbury Tales*.

44 See Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978)25, as well as Dinshaw's reading of the Conclusion in *Getting Medieval*, 70-72.

45 Actually, the excesses of those in religious institutions were the reason for the Lollard call for the abolition of religious professions altogether.

46 Hudson, 25. Dinshaw 69. This is in direct contradistinction to Foucault's formulation in *The History of Sexuality*, of sexuality in the Middle Ages as constituted around acts rather than identities, as Dinshaw points out later in her book.

47 Dennison, 203.

48 Dinshaw, 81-82.

49 Ibidem.

50 Ibidem.

51 See Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992),131.

52 Dinshaw, 83.

53 The homoerotics of the Eucharist have been well documented by Bynum as well as Margaretta K. Bowers *Conflicts of the Clergy: A Psychodynamic Study with Case Histories* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1963) and James C. Waller's response to Bowers in "A Man in a Cassock is Wearing a Skirt," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4 (1998): 1-15.

54 This is Dinshaw's recapitulation of Elliot in "Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray: Nocturnal Emissions and the Sexuality of the Clergy," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy MacCracken, and James A. Schulz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1-23. It usefully pinpoints what

is at the heart of anxieties over men touching and tasting the body of Christ as their central relation to God. Dinshaw, 84-5.

55 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 151.

56 See Norman P. Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31*. (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 44-45.

57 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 86.

58 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 250.

59 Bynum uses the example of Christina of Markyate holding the infant Christ to her breast and feeling "His presence within her even through the barrier of her flesh" in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 248.

60 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 92.

61 Ibidem, 91.

62 Ibidem, 92.

63 Ibidem, 204.

64 See, for instance Emily Steiner's work on the Charters of Christ in *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) or Karma Lochrie's work on Margery Kempe in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) as well as Mary Carruthers' mention of the trope in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

65 Mary Carruthers, for instance, in her *Book of Memory* argues that the mnemonic nature of medieval literary culture meant that the modern idea of an Author as locus of meaning and intention in a text was simply nonexistent. Authority was conferred upon a text communally; the more often a text was read or recapitulated the more *auctoritas* it garnered, until the text itself was an established *auctor*, not its progenitor. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: University Press, 2008)

66 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 77.