



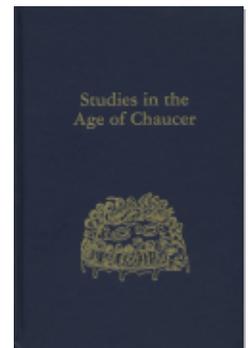
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The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance by Leah DeVun (review)

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LEAH DEVUN. *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. 315. \$105 cloth; \$35 paper; \$34.99 e-book.

The Shape of Sex had my heart racing as fast as my mind. In this spectacularly dizzying work DeVun spins a literary history of nonbinary sex from the “Adam androgyne” of early Christian theology to the “Jesus hermaphrodite” of early modern alchemy. Central to DeVun’s book is the changing—and changeable—nonbinary-sexed figure. The nonbinary-sexed figure inspired medieval theologians, jurists, alchemists, surgeons, and poets in their myriad attempts to explain the divinity of the world and the bodies that make it up. *The Shape of Sex* moves between histories of intersex people, such as Berengaria’s medical case presented to a Catalan court, and ideas about nonbinary sex that shaped premodern ideas of what it meant to be human. DeVun’s comprehensive history of nonbinary imagery spans periods (late antique through early modern) and genres (popular literature, theological and legal commentaries, medical and scientific texts), and builds a new framework for approaching transgender and nonbinary history in the premodern world. Informed by critical work in trans and queer studies in fields both premodern and contemporary, this book challenges how medieval writers imagined presumed binary divisions of the world and shows that in doing this historical work we “cannot help but reenvision our own categories” (7).

The approach of the book is as delicate as it is meticulous. DeVun is a methodical scholar who cares deeply about the subject material at hand. In the introduction, DeVun explains the long history of the term “hermaphrodite,” used in the Middle Ages and in scholarship, to define gender-variant people. As the title demonstrates, DeVun’s study is a history of nonbinary gender, which includes intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and gender-variant persons. While intersex and transgender are not synonymous, DeVun shows how the interrelation of both have often been explained by the popular mid-century medicalized term “hermaphrodite” in historical texts. Intersex and transgender people share a history of discrimination specific to bodily autonomy and health, and DeVun states that *The Shape of Sex* is a study that “grounds its subjects in the history of both groups” (9). Though our modern categories of gender variance fit imperfectly onto the past, DeVun shows the importance of working through premodern taxonomies of embodiment because a trans history “allows us to foreground different kinds of gender-crossings from the past, making

them legible and meaningful to readers now” (9). Carefully divorcing terms such as transgender from a strictly identitarian use, DeVun opts for the language of “nonbinary” as an overall term to encompass intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and gender-variant embodiments in the premodern world. *The Shape of Sex* offers a new hermeneutic to approach nonbinary people in medieval and early modern archives.

Prior to DeVun’s book, studies on intersex, nonbinary, and trans people and embodiment in the Middle Ages were few and far between. DeVun draws on several foundational studies that have charted premodern histories of intersex—Ruth Gilbert’s *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories* (2002) and Kathleen P. Long’s *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* (2006)—and sexual difference—Joan Cadden’s *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (1993). Making capacious the category of sexual difference, DeVun also draws on recent collections that bring trans methodologies to medieval texts, such as *postmedieval*’s 2018 volume on *Medieval Intersex: Language and Hermaphroditism*, edited by Ruth Evans, which also features DeVun’s brilliant piece “Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time.” *The Shape of Sex* is also indebted to recent work by transgender scholars in medieval and early modern literature and history, such as Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski, a leading voice in premodern trans studies, who, alongside Dorothy Kim, recently co-edited “Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism,” published in *Medieval Feminist Forum*.

The publication of *The Shape of Sex* emerges at an exciting time. DeVun’s book complements several new edited collections on trans and nonbinary histories in the premodern world: *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (2021), edited by Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall, and *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (2021), edited by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska, which features DeVun’s essay “Mapping the Borders of Sex.” Taken together, this 2021 publication triad would form an exceptional archive for undergraduate and graduate students to encounter trans and nonbinary literary histories. Further, this uptick in publications on trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer pasts offers a barometer to gauge the direction of premodern and early modern studies—it is a generative cultural moment to be doing this vital work.

The Shape of Sex traces the intricate discourses around embodied difference outside a model of persecution or of adoration. While some medieval authors conflated gender-variant bodies with deviance, many acknowledged

nonbinary sex as “a divine and human ideal” (11). DeVun investigates this countertradition, and the book’s temporal arc affords acceptance of nonbinary-sexed figures in writings from early Christianity to the dawn of the Renaissance. In the first chapter DeVun introduces us to the “primal androgyne” or “Adam androgyne,” a figure that embodied divine perfection prior to human sin. Moving between reverence and rejection, nonbinary sex became an exegetical exercise in understanding the relationship between human and divine form. Medieval thinkers drew upon early Christian writers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, who saw sexual difference as a temporary aspect of human existence and not something essential to human nature or divinity.

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the mutually reinforced categories of gender and race in marginalizing bodies, quite literally, on the edge of society. DeVun trestles nonbinary sex and race in an examination of the nonbinary-sexed bodies in the English Hereford *mappamundi*. These nonbinary-sexed figures are positioned at the margins of the medieval world, and are racially coded through clothing. One nonbinary-sexed figure wears a turban, while the other wears a *pileum cornutum*, a pointed hat overtly associated with Jewish people. The chapter demonstrates the spatial marginalization of nonbinary-sexed bodies, which populated the border of the *mappamundi*’s known world. DeVun turns to scholarship on medieval monsters (e.g., Asa Mittman, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Dana Oswald) to explain how the racialized nonbinary-sexed figure was used to delineate boundaries between the human domain and what lay beyond. Compellingly, DeVun shows how medieval authors imagined “mythic monstrous-race hermaphrodites” through the visual depiction of Janus, the “Roman god of travel, doorways, and thresholds” (53). By linking the spatial marginalization of nonbinary bodies in *mappamundi* with the temporal signification of Janus-faced figures, DeVun reveals how the nonbinary-sexed figure emerged as a visual engagement of temporal doubleness—the beginning and end of time.

Extending the occasional medieval propensity to view nonbinary-sexed figures as monstrous, DeVun turns to the bestiary tradition in Chapter 3. The hyena represents overlapping and interlocking modes of difference: it was an animal thought to be unclean, violent, and hermaphroditical, a triad that DeVun links to the anti-Jewish polemics of medieval England. What medieval Christians believed hyenas and Jews to share was an inconsistency—the hyena to gender and the Jew to faith—and this discourse

became a portent in bestiaries from Guillaume le Clerc's Anglo-Norman *Bestiaire* to the Aberdeen Bestiary. The presumption that Jews could change their sex was implicitly coded in the depiction of the hyena and other "unclean" and duplicatory beasts, such as the manticore, in medieval bestiaries. The second and third chapters, when taken together, triangulate race, gender, and species division, and show how medieval thinkers relied on strict taxonomies to divide the world.

In an elaborate fourth chapter, DeVun outlines the naturalist discourse that exploded between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, which informed the cultural logics appended to intersex people. Drawing on naturalist thinkers in science, theology, and canon law, DeVun shows how nonbinary sex was most often consigned to "lower organisms including plants and 'imperfect' animals," and was an impossibility among higher animals such as humans (104). This perspective was largely Aristotelian in nature. Medieval Christian thinkers presumed that generative capacity was central to one's embodiment, and they aligned that capacity with being "natural." Bodies that departed from this teleology of reproduction were largely condemned to the sphere of "unnatural." Still, Aristotelian naturalism was not the only discourse in circulation; medieval authors were informed by Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Sīnā (980–1037), who proposed many nonbinary sex categories in his *Canon of Medicine*. The neutrality of attitudes toward intersex people among Muslim thinkers was because "Islamic anatomical and physiological treatises tended to accept a diverse range of human sexes" inclusive of intersex people; trans, masculine, and feminine people; and other morphologies that did not fit neatly into binary categories (111).

The naturalist discourse that strongarmed the majority of theological and philosophical texts in the medieval period also took root in medical and scientific textual traditions. The fifth chapter traces attitudes toward nonbinary sex in medieval surgical manuals. While medieval medical treatments of nonbinary sex do not wholly prefigure modern medical practices on intersex people, DeVun reveals how premodern ideas of "correction" are not so different from the medical biases against intersex people in our contemporary moment. As such, this chapter offers new perspectives on premodern medical and surgical traditions that portend modern injustices in the medical field against intersex and transgender people. Physicians such as Al-Zahrāwī (d. 1013) classified nonbinary sex into four categories, which he delineated based on "curative" ability. Medieval

surgeons saw nonbinary-sexed people as in need of cure, and this attempt to “fix” nonbinary sex was also an attempt to “correct” nature. Surgeons such as Lanfranc of Milan (1250–1315) stated that “nature erred seriously” in her creation of intersex people (142). Lanfranc’s surgical objective in “fixing” nonbinary sex meant shaping the body to accommodate intercourse with a cisgender man.

Assuming the prerogative to shape and manipulative bodies was not solely in the hands of medieval surgeons. Alchemists, too, were fascinated by the extremes of nature, and saw potential in the transformation of matter. In a transcendent final chapter, DeVun meditates on the theological and embodied possibilities of the “Jesus hermaphrodite” in medieval and early modern alchemical literature. I’ve been enamored with DeVun’s earlier work on the gendered valences of alchemy, and this chapter expands on that research to consider how the nonbinary-sexed body came to represent the beginning and end of time (and evokes the Janus-faced imagery of Chapter 2). The chapter argues that the “alchemical hermaphrodite,” a nonbinary-sexed figure that represents the *magnum opus* of alchemical arts, was an embrace of nonbinary sex. Like the divinity of the primal androgyne in the first chapter, the Jesus hermaphrodite embodied the joining of opposites into a perfect harmony. As DeVun explains, the alchemical hermaphrodite was “not merely a midpoint between opposites but a body that held contraries in stasis and conversation” (169). The sublimity of alchemy is made manifest in the plentiful gender of the nonbinary-sexed figure. It is through the “alchemical hermaphrodite” that practitioners may find divinity.

Medievalists need *The Shape of Sex*. DeVun’s work is a tour de force; it is deeply learned and covers a vast range of literary and historical material. Owing to DeVun’s fastidious research, the tall order of the book’s subtitle, “Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance,” meets and exceeds expectations. Not only should this book be essential reading for those working in premodern and early modern studies, but it will be an indispensable text for anyone studying transgender and nonbinary history. As DeVun acknowledges in the introduction, *The Shape of Sex* “bears witness to the considerable burden that sex- and gender-marginalized people shouldered in meaning-making and human-making in the history of premodern Europe” (5). This text proves that medieval studies and trans studies need each other, and that the weight of the past is never lifted, just suspended. Finally, to return to my racing heart: DeVun’s book is a love letter to those of us who are trans, nonbinary,

and queer working in premodern studies, and I felt transformed by its communion.

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EMILY DOLMANS. *Writing Regional Identities in Medieval England: From the "Gesta Herwardi" to "Richard Coer de Lyon."* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. xiv, 235. \$95.00 cloth; \$29.95 e-book.

Scholarship on the articulation of English identity during the medieval period has been somewhat of a boom industry over the past twenty-five years. To a large extent initiated by the publication of Thorlac Turville-Petre's *England the Nation* in 1996, the subfield has borne forth a rich variety of monographs, articles, and conferences examining the development of Englishness, in its manifold theorized forms, from the arrival of the Early English through to the end of the Middle Ages. Many of these studies have sought to understand these nascent forms of English group identity (the concept of nation is problematic in a medieval context) by examining the way in which identity coalesces around the center, most often in the form of the elite community of the realm, the *communitas regni*. Emily Dolmans's much-needed 2020 study, *Writing Regional Identities in Medieval England: From the "Gesta Herwardi" to "Richard Coer de Lyon,"* provides a timely nuancing of such a centralized model of identity, arguing convincingly that much medieval Englishness is determinedly local and regional in nature. Judiciously ranging across a wide span of multilingual literature set within, and on the borders of, medieval England, Dolmans's book makes a convincing case for a renewed examination of the myriad ways in which Englishness is imagined across a variety of locales during this period.

The book comprises a framing introduction and five chapters, each of which forms a case study of a particular regional form or mode of English identity. The introduction, "These Englands: Regional Identities and Cultural Contacts," highlights two key aspects central to Dolmans's argument. First is the plural nature of the identity formations to be examined. Each construction of English identity performed in these texts is different, sometimes in nature, sometimes in degree, reminding us of the communal