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To Steven, *sine quo non*

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ABSTRACT

Is he, or isn't he? Ambiguity and indeterminacy are powerful incitements to sexual interest for certain queer adventurers. The flamboyant and in-your-face faggot has undeniable charms; the unequivocally straight he-man is an attractive challenge; but the doubt that graces and gilds an uncertain target is a consummate come-on. For the queer reader, the enigmatic or polysemous text is a similar turn-on. Ambiguity is an invitation to approach, pursue, or persuade.

This dissertation is a culmination of my encounters with sexual ambiguity in medieval literature. In my attempts to come to terms with negative representations of homoerotic desire or expression, I began a flirtation with certain texts that are usually understood to promulgate an unambiguous condemnation of same-sex erotic activity or attachment. My readings reveal these texts to be far-from-unequivocal. Their language is, itself, dubious, and insofar as language was analogized to sexual practices they are, themselves, sexually suspect. These texts present images that are open to multiple interpretation—often troublingly erotic. At the level of the word, these authors employ polysemy and dubiety that challenge a superficial understanding of their antisodomitical sense.

My chapter on the Anglo-Saxon riddles of the Exeter Book explores how the obscene can be concealed in the commonplace. The riddle form is an elaborate type of metaphor or simile. My exploration of the mechanism at the gross level will prepare my reader for my more subtle suspicions of the sexual in later texts. Exploiting the ambiguity of Old English in his deliberately obscure descriptions, the poems invite readers to picture obscene action and objects as solutions to ostensibly benign enigmas. The unnamed is unmentionable, the unspoken, the unspeakable.

My chapters on Peter Damian and Alain de Lille—and a preliminary excursus on exegetical practices (“A Monstration”)—demonstrate my queer interpretive method, recognizing in their use of polysemous Latin a potential for play and perversion. The anti-sodomitical texts embrace paradox and paronomasia—the potential for a word to signify multiple (sometimes contradictory) ideas simultaneously. Word-play enacts sex-play, and *paronomasia*, therefore, perpetrates *paranomesis*, transgressive conduct. The careful reader can discern an ambiguous attitude toward the topic both in *what* these texts say and the *way* in which it is said. These texts say one thing but hint at another. Rather than the oppressive polemics we imagined, the *Liber Gomorrheanus* and *de Planctu Natura* become liberating paeans to the perverse or peculiar.

My dissection of Chaucer’s pansified Pardoner lays bare a related phenomenon: How language and other signs may be adopted to obscure the patently obvious. Chaucer exploits the plasticity of Middle English to problematize the Pardoner’s predatory (and predatory) practices. Despite all manner of misdirection, the anxious pilgrim’s constant insistence on corporal language and imagery always returns the reader to the source and site of sexual disgust: the Pardoner’s anomalous body.

I figure wordplay as sex-play, fostered by the queer’s ambiguous relation to ambiguous speech. There is something in the nature of language—polysemy, plasticity—that speaks to the gay sensibility precariously situated at the margins of intelligibility or invisibility. My method combines the impulses of the *eromenos* (boy-lover) and the *hermeneus* (interpreter). This eromeneutics intends to encourage and equip like-minded readers to approach texts fearlessly. In flirting with these texts and their meanings, critics should consider the semantically tentative tempting. A queer interpretation informed by double consciousness delves the conscious doubleness of these texts. Through such tilling, the field of study becomes a playground.

Introition

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who look beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.”

Oscar Wilde

Paronomasia and Paranomesis

In an essay on the continuities between late and early forms of the Latin language, particularly Baudri of Bourgueil’s amorous verse and its engagement with Ovid, Monika Otter writes, “Medieval Latin is ‘always parodic,’ not in the sense of being facetious or satirical, but in the sense of resisting, citing, celebrating, and fighting the Classics, and in a sense of filling old cultural forms with new content.”¹ Baudri also repurposes Vergilian erotic material. In an allurement to monastic life—and the sharing of literary pursuits—Baudri (*Carmen* 129) sings: “*Et fidibus lentis aptabimus organa nostra*” (And we will fit our voices to leisured lyres). Sylvia Parsons and David Townsend observe:

The seduction into a shared landscape and shared language fuses Baudri’s invitation to monastic life with the fictional allurements of the pastoral landscape. In doing so, it transforms a notoriously homoerotic school text into an inducement to a homosocial monastic praxis poised continuously at the threshold of desire. The seductive male voice of the teacher speaks through the shared culture of a scandalous classical text to incorporate the addressee into monastic culture conceived as a poetic landscape.²

¹ “Renaissances and Revivals” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature*, p. 548. There was also another erotic literary tradition to draw upon: the Song of Songs. In *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West*, Lynda Coon suggests its mystical language was a model for poetic/erotic expression. “That very tradition reveals a queer space where actual erotic attachments and affections can be safely articulated” (p. 18).

² “Medieval Latin and the Fashioning of the Self: Gender” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature*, p. 438.

This acknowledges the sexual charge created by adopting a homosexual poetic tradition (pastoral poetry and Vergil's second eclogue, in particular) for a use within a different pastoral community. But it ignores the erotic charge present in almost every word in the line. That is, Baudri's bawdry. *Aptare* means to join together, often sexually, which must be activated (if not prioritized) in the reader's mind by the slippery *organa* to be joined (musical instruments, certainly, but also male genital organs). And, if the reader is not entirely persuaded by the unarticulated "organs," Baudri particularizes them. They are *fides*, lyres, yes, but also the strings of that instrument, which, like its synonym *nervus* (sinew), conjures the image of the tumescent male genitalia. (One must embrace the cloud of associations which envelops each Latin word.) To top it off, Baudri says the—musical? muscular?—playing will be *lentus*. This word is remarkably polysemous, and many of its meanings invite sexual wordplay. *Lentus* has the sense of "slowly, leisurely" (which is the one which most readers reach for here), but its primary sense is *pliant, flexible, willing*. So these are pliant, ready rods. And in a particularly erotic context, *lentus* means "slow to come"! Cf. Tibullus:

"*Heu quam Marathus lento me torquet amore!*" (Alas, how Marathus torments me with love's delay!). And it doesn't stop there, for *lentus* also suggests "sticky" or "viscous." So the entire mental image conjured by Baudri's simple [?] line is that we will (like Corydon and Alexis) bring together our eager, ready, supple, and sticky instruments. And we'll take our time doing it! In my parsing of the phrase, I realize I ignore Baudri's own advice. "*Non sis*," he says, "*verborum scurrilis leno meorum. Perlege, quiquid erit, sine suspitione sinistra*"³ (Do not be a scurrilous pimp of my words; read whatever it is without sinister suspicion). However, like Larry Scanlon (on the word choice of Bernard of Clairvaux) I find it difficult to do otherwise: "It is hard to see how this

³ "Medieval Latin and the Fashioning of the Self: Sex and Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature*, p. 454.

figurative choice could be anything but self-conscious and intentional.” The very warning to resist a left-handed reading is a notification that such interpretation is possible.

Baudri poem is a striking advertisement for the monastery; it’s a homo promo. All it needs is the proper perceptive and receptive audience. The texts of medieval authors like Baudri are enlarged by the receptive reader, engorged with semantic possibility. These texts are sites of seduction, offering occasion and location for erotic play. *Pace* Brian Patrick McGuire, who claims there “was no self-conscious gay life style in the Middle Ages as there is today,”⁴ we can imagine a self-conscious (writing) style that expresses (and constitutes) a gay sensibility, if not a gay community. There is certainly nothing to stop the reader from picking up on textual queerness and pursuing it. Unlike the implicit danger of misreading unintended signs and signals in the behavior or speech of straight men as sexual invitations, the book poses no threat. It cannot injure us. Nor, for that matter, can we injure it—despite the clamor of critics who see such interpretation as intrusion, even as sexual violence upon a cherished (and therefore chaste) text.

McGuire maintains that “there was a clear line between celibate male friendship and love, even with homoerotic undertones, and the overtly sexual expression of this love in homosexuality.” This is one way to obscure homosexuality—by equating it with genital sexuality. This is akin to the contemporary opponents’ emphasis on anal intercourse—thereby ignoring other (sexual and non-sexual) dimensions of same-sex love. Like the connection between erotics and poetics. “[I]n certain troubadour lyrics the erotic and poetic are part of the same impulse,” writes Gaunt:

The generation of layers of meaning thus becomes a playful libidinal activity while the uncovering or peeling back of these layers of meaning by [his] audience—whether these be listeners or readers—is also implicitly portrayed as

⁴ “Sexual Awareness and Identity in Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–67)” in *American Benedictine Review* 45:2, (1994).

pleasurable. Since pleasure in this poem is always implicitly, but ambiguously sexual, hermeneutics becomes erotic.⁵

We must take punning seriously, that is, as a legitimate avenue toward (or conduit of) meaning. We need not accept Isidore's fanciful etymologies as "true" linguistic genealogies to recognize that the medieval reader thought words could "encode" meaning, as well as express it. Furthermore, the interpretive tradition not only enables the exegete to discern and decipher meaning but also teaches him to devise metaphor to conceal, disguise, or distort a meaning.⁶ Certainly, the interpretation of the Song of Songs could defuse the dangerous or potentially problematic intent or effect of the poetry. Conversely, the mastery of allegoresis and exegesis would also allow the writer to create a superficially safe semantic vessel whose erotic content was concealed. These authors recognized more than a morphological similarity between *eros* and *ieros*. The hieratic and erotic are of similar (if not the same) substance. Love is sacred. If an amorous poem can hide theological import, a religious one can contain erotic meaning.

Uncertain Signs

In his *De Ordine* (II.12.35) Augustine, theorizing on the bonds created when men speak or write to each other, writes:

⁵ Gaunt, p. 94.

⁶ Augustine emphasized the *pleasure* that an author gives his readers by couching ideas in metaphorical language:

But why I view them with greater delight under that aspect than if no such figure were drawn from the sacred books, though the fact would remain the same and the knowledge the same, is another question, and one very difficult to answer. Nobody, however, has any doubt about the facts, both that it is pleasanter in some cases to have knowledge communicated through figures and that what is attended with difficulty in the seeking gives greater pleasure in the finding. (*On Christian Doctrine* II.8, p.38)

[Reason] has imposed words, that is to say, certain meaningful sounds, upon things. It has done this because it draws us into association by a kind of natural bond with those with whom we share rationality; and men could not be solidly associated with one another unless they could talk to each other and by doing so share, as it were, what is in their minds and thoughts. For as we cannot feel one another's minds, they can nevertheless be joined together by shared meanings, as through an interpreter.⁷

Augustine's description of what happens "between men" is, itself, suggestive, since so many of his words may carry a sexual charge—*astringebatur, sociari, sentire, copulandos, refunderent*. These are, to draw together; to besmirch or join bodies (according to *GELL*); to feel; to fuck; to flow. *Astringo* may entail an even more salacious connotation. Its root conveys "to touch," "to stroke" and "to unsheathe." It sometimes means "to strip off bark" (like *deglubo*, where the metaphor is a euphemism for jerking someone off).⁸ Lest anyone condemn me for attending to

⁷ [...] quia naturali quodam vinculo in eorum societate astringebatur, cum quibus illi erat ratio ipsa communis, nec homini homo firmissime sociari posset nisi colloquerentur atque ita sibi mentes suas cogitationesque quasi refunderent, vident esse imponenda rebus vocabula, id est significantes quosdam sonos, ut, quoniam sentire animos suos non poterant, ad eos sibi copulandos sensu quasi interprete uterentur.

Humor also has such adhesive properties, with a similar sexual correlate—as exciting laughter, and creating intimate bonds between participants (Quintilian *Inst. Or.* VI.3.7): "Neque enim ab ulla satis explicari puto, licet multi temptaverint, unde risus, qui non solum facto aliquo dictove, sed interdum quodam etiam corporis tactu lacescit" (Neither do I think that anyone can adequately explain, though many have been tempted to try, whence rises laughter, which is aroused not only by word or deed, but sometimes, somehow, even by touching the body). Or consider *Inst. Or.* VI.3.8–9: "Tamen habet vim nescio an imperiosissimam et cui repugnari minime potest. Erumpit etiam invitis saepe, nec vultus modo ac vocis exprimit confessionem, sed totum corpus vi sua concutit" (It has a certain imperious force of its own which it is very hard to resist. It often breaks out against our will and extorts confession of its power, not merely from our face and voice, but convulses the whole body as well). Laughter as splooge: an eruption which causes guttural grunts, contortions of the face, and the violent shaking of the body. One must only wonder in what way this paroxysm is "unwanted" or "against our will." Perhaps *invitis* is to be understood as "un-willed," outside the operation of the will, like post-lapsarian erections and nocturnal emissions.

⁸ We are reminded of the similarly charged language in the *Confessions*, when he recalls the bond of love with an unnamed friend in the language of the Song of Songs: "My eyes sought him everywhere, but they did not see him; and I hated all places because he was not in them, because

the semantic part at the expense of the whole (syllable, as opposed to word), I proffer Jonathon Culler's observation:

[P]uns show speakers intently or playfully working to reveal the structures of language, motivating linguistic signs, allowing signifiers to affect meaning by generating new connections—in short, responding to the call of the phoneme, whose echoes tell of wild realms beyond the code and suggest new configurations of meaning [...] Puns present the disquieting spectacle of a functioning of language where boundaries—between sounds, between sound and letter, between meanings—count for less than one might imagine[.]⁹

To inform my own readings, I will rely on Culler's work and that of Frederick Ahl and Walter Redfern (as well as that of their predecessors in parsing paronomasia, like Cicero and Quintilian). I hope to come to a clearer conception of how wordplay is not only to be figured as sex-play, but how it is fostered by the queer's ambiguous relation to ambiguous speech. There is something in the nature of language—polysemy, plasticity—that speaks to the gay sensibility precariously situated at the margins of intelligibility or invisibility.

they could not say to me, 'Look, he is coming.'" Augustine is a good foundation for my exploration of seamy semiotics, for he grasped the relation of sex and meaning (or the sensual to the sensible), which could both be relayed by the same word: *sensus*. On the sensuality of words and their potential as a source of pleasure (on words as things), Augustine opines (and pines):

For example, our speech is accomplished by sounds which signify meanings, but a meaning is not complete unless one word passes away, when it has sounded its part, so that the next may follow after it. Let my soul praise thee, in all these things, O God, the Creator of all; but let not my soul be stuck to these things by the glue of love, through the senses of the body. For they go where they were meant to go, that they may exist no longer. And they rend the soul with pestilent desires because she longs to be and yet loves to rest secure in the created things she loves.

⁹ "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1988) p. 3. Augustine, himself, knew this. In *On Christian Doctrine* (Book III), where he expounds his theory of scriptural interpretation, he explores the dangers of ambiguity at the level of the seme or morpheme. As when the biblical *os* can be understood as either "bone" or "mouth": "Est etiam ambiguitas in sono dubio syllabarum" (There is, again, an ambiguity arising out of the doubtful sound of syllables).

Late in life Nietzsche lamented the limitations placed on metaphysics by language, believing that some thoughts were unthinkable merely because of the strictures that the structure of linguistic order imposes upon us (and which we slavishly submit to). "All rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme we cannot throw off."¹⁰ In his posthumous notes he repines that "we have to cease to think, if we refuse to do it in the prison house of language." Yet other writers thinking about the relation of language to truth have not futilely banged their heads against that wall. For them language is not a prison house, but a funhouse.¹¹ Furthermore, they realize that even in the most distorting mirrors we can recognize ourselves.

In a workshop on one of the chapters in this dissertation, I had described my experience with certain texts, in which I got the sensation (at times troubling, at others thrilling) that I was reading two texts simultaneously. On the surface the text said one thing, but I was seeing something else. Now, this is not an unusual experience for a medievalist, accustomed as we are

¹⁰ Earlier (*Twilight of the Idols*) he had lamented, "Reason within language: O, what a deceptive old woman! I fear that we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar." Nietzsche's image, here, is noteworthy. This avatar of modernity resorts to the time-worn personification of reason, but provocatively perverts her; she becomes bawd. Jean de Meun's *Raison* and *la Vieille* become one. This is perhaps apropos for his exploration of the relation of language to truth, because it is *Raison*'s dialogue with *Amant* that articulates the nominalist dilemma. This medieval maneuver might be explained by Nietzsche's critique of metaphor and metaphysics:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. ("On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, pp 46–7, Walter Kaufman, translator.)

¹¹ Maybe language is a playhouse. Or cathouse, inviting us to enjoy and exhaust ourselves in its abundance. Or both: Boethius' Reason likens poetry's muses to *scenicas meretriculas* (whores of the playhouse).

to allegory, the genre *par excellence* of the Middle Ages. But I was surprised by what I saw beneath the veil of allegory: sex. Queer sex, in particular. Granted, not in every text. (Had that been the case, I would have begun to question my instrument of intellection.) But those that lacked this dimension afforded no *frisson*, and I found myself spending more time with those texts which spoke to me.¹² In time, I began to believe that they *were* speaking *to me*. Or, at least, I was hearing some inherent signal. I need not imagine that these authors, like Andre Gide, addressed this writing to an unknown future reader who would respond to their amorous calls. Whatever the hopes of these authors, their work washed ashore at the feet of a suggestable beachcomber.

One colleague questioned whether my method was akin to looking up dirty words in the dictionary. Another friend claimed that I saw queerness everywhere. My gaydar was off or—worse—I was behaving like someone who thinks every good-looking guy is (must be!) gay. Do I only *look for* the dirty words? Or are they *all I find*? Is there a third alternative? I was asked if I could give a demonstration of my method. As an experiment, to find productive resistance, I decided to peruse, to cruise a text which would rebuke my advances. One whose heteronormative bona fides were maintained by all, gay and straight, alike: Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus*.

¹² Recent neuroscience research on personal aspects of aesthetic experience has found evidence for increased brain activity when art “involved self-referential thought or self-relevant information.” The stimulus was seen to activate the same cortical regions as the subject’s name. The results suggest “that certain artworks, albeit unfamiliar, may be so well-matched to an individual’s unique makeup that they obtain access to the neural substrates concerned with the self. [. . .] This account is consistent with the modern notion that individuals’ taste in art is linked with their sense of identity[.]” (See Vessel, Starr, and Rubin, “Art reaches within: aesthetic experience, the self and the default mode network.” *Frontiers of Neuroscience* 7:258.) If this aesthetic response is present in the consumers of art, might it also be operative in the producers, as well? That is, might our sense of self influence the aesthetic expressions we chose? Might the queer self gravitate to (or devise) certain queer modes of expression?

In truth, the shriveled old tome, held little allure for me.¹³ To my astonishment, the sour, sickly, prickly, parsimonious paragon put up no fight. Peter yielded at my first approach. Centuries of dust and desuetude fell away, and the text opened itself to my palpations like some polyp.

The preface, proper, to Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus*, begins: “*Quoddam autem nefandum et ignominiosum valde vitium in nostris partibus inolevit, cui nisi districtae animadversionis manus quantocius obviet, certum est, quod divini furoris gladius in multorum perniciem immaniter grassaturus impendet. Heu!*” The language here is suggestive, suspect. Latin, at least since Jerome, was the principle language of Biblical exegesis. But it also was the repository of classical paganism. A word's seemingly straightforward meaning could be undermined by echoes of its use in Roman authors, particularly erotic or satiric writings—Catullus, Martial, Petronius, or the *Priapeia*.¹⁴ Damian indicates *from the first* that he will employ verbal ambiguity and ambivalence in the *Liber*, revealing a poet's sense of the capacity of words to multiply their meanings. Of course, such profuse proliferation is, itself, a sign of irregular sexuality. Damian writes: “*Quoddam autem nefandum et ignominiosum valde vitium in nostris partibus inolevit,*” which Peter Payer (p. 27) translates as: “A certain abominable and terribly shameful vice has grown up in our region.”¹⁵ Of course, to gloss *nostris partibus*

¹³ In my notes on an earlier reading of the text (in translation), I found the following remark. It reveals how even a predisposed reader may miss its charms when attending only to surface meanings: “I'll allow that Peter Damian's prose polemic *The Book of Gomorrah* is a straightforward text. As such, it is less seductive, and—like Lot's neighbor's—audiences are unlikely to give it a friendly welcome.”

¹⁴ “At its subtlest, what the *translatio studii* describes is the productive interchange between past and present or Latin and vernacular or both.” Scanlon, p 448.

¹⁵ Two editions of The *Liber Gomorrhianus* exist in English. Both are excellent introductions to this text, which is so often ignored or dismissed. See Pierre J. Payer's *Book of Gomorrah: An eleventh century treatise against clerical homosexual practice*. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press. 1982.) A more recent translation appears as Letter 31 in Owen J. Blum's *Peter Damian, Letters 31–60* (in the *Fathers of the Church Fathers of the Church–Medieval Continuation* series from

geographically is legitimate. But Peter may be putting paronomasia in play. “These parts” are also “our parts,” that is, our body’s members. There is also a hint that this is confessional, that this circumlocution is part and parcel of the “unspeakability” of the sin in question. Damian refers to himself in the first-person plural, *nos*, throughout. “*In nostris partibus*,” therefore, suggests that the vice has grown in *Damian’s own* sexual parts.

The use of the verb *inolesco* (“to grow in, on, to” anything) is noteworthy, too. It introduces the agronomic metaphor that Damian employs throughout. The *vitium* grows *in* (or, perhaps, into—with the sense of “is ingrafted to”) the body. He implants an image of penetration in the mind of the reader. This is also the first of many times that Damian allows the slippage between *vitium* (“vice”) and *vitis* (“vine” or “branch,” with possible phallic potential—whence the medieval French *vit* and English *wit*). In short, in this short introit to the issue of sodomy, Damian introduces doubt about its location and locution; its means and agents.

Regarding this *vitium*, Damian claims that, “*cui nisi districtae animadversionis manus quantocius obviet, certum est, quod divini furoris gladius in multorum perniciem immaniter grassaturus impendet.*” That is, in Blum’s straightforward rendering: “[A]nd unless it be prevented as soon as possible by the severest punishment, it is certain that the sword of divine fury will be unsheathed, leading in its unchecked violence to the destruction of many.” Here, again, there is a condensation of ambiguous language in the space of a single line. Beneath the metaphor of a vengeful god, we encounter threatening sexuality. *Districtae* is “severe” or “strict,” we know, but, besides the sense of censure, *distringo* also means to “touch gently” or to

the Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1990). Both translators opt for a straightforward translation of Damian’s Latin. Occasionally, they communicate the comic incongruity of the text. The Latin text can be found in *Opera Omnia*, volume 145 of *Patrologia Latina*, J.P. Migne, ed. Paris: Vives (1874).

strip off, especially, the leaves of plants. The word also means to draw from a sheath, which connects its metaphorically (if illogically) to *gladium* in the succeeding clause. Remember that *gladium* is among the most frequent circumlocutions for the male member. Its proximity to the speaker's—or is it the sinner's?—hand, is problematic, as is the question of the sheath from which it is to be extracted. (Is it the vagina, or the buttocks, or the fist created by that very hand?) The problem of the *gladium dei* arises throughout (as will that of god's body, in general).¹⁶

Damian's text continues to be used as a cudgel against sexual irregularity. I propose reading it to show how the slyly erotic language of Latin satire and an ambiguous exegetical program may speak to queer sensibilities. Damian's innovations allow attuned readers to recognize themselves within this interpretive community. For those who can read it right, this text, where longing and language coalesce, becomes a place of—and implement in—resistance to the very structures and strictures it pretends to promote.

Is the *Liber Gomorrhianus* the first volley in a lewd and learned *ludus*? Damian's letter was—eventually—embraced by any number of severe writers on sexual morality. What has gone unremarked is the influence it may have had on such readers as Alanus, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean de Meun, and their imitators who flirt with sexual irregularity under cover of propriety. We

¹⁶ The body is ever-present to Damian. In the same passage where he hints at dubiety, he speaks of “*totum corpus Ecclesiae*” (the entire body of the church), beginning with its seat and ending with its head (*sedes omnium Ecclesiarum; uno capite ecclesiasticae*). *Sedes* and *caput* are well-attested as figures for the ass and penis in Latin literature. See Pierre Pierrugues’ *Glossarium Eroticum Linguæ Latinæ*, an invaluable source for material on scurrilous Latin, as is *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* of J.N. Adams. I will have frequent resource to these texts throughout my dissertation. In *GELL*, for example, Pierrugues cites use of *caput* (“*pro pene*”) in the writings of Cicero, Catullus, Tibullus, Juvenal, Lactantius, Lucilius, Petronius, Propertius, Suetonius, and the *Priapea*. *Sedere* and its cognates are seen in Tertullian, Catullus, Juvenal, and Petronius. Adams notes that *sedes* appears in Pliny. Of course, not every use of these terms must carry these connotations. Otherwise, we must imagine that every sports event is laden with eroticism because of the coin toss’ “heads or tails.”

must put the “problem” in focus. Why, in most of the best-known texts which include homophobic discourse and which appear to be entirely complicit with a repressive, coercive regime, can we continue to locate traces of resistance to that regime, especially in authors who have often been read as mouthpieces for repressive ideological apparatuses (Church, monastery, or court)? Did disciplinary and fictional texts ever serve as lures to “sodomites” within the clergy, the monasteries, and convents?¹⁷ Did they provide the conduit through which authorities could address such individuals directly by encouraging them to identify with the portraits sketched in the texts? If so, should this double-speak and constant monitoring of the self be seen as a continuation of classical thought—Foucault’s “*souci de soi*”—or, rather, as the institution and early manifestation of what he called the “repressive hypothesis?” The problem these texts identify: Homosexual desire in a society that decries this. And the problem that these texts comprise: Language as an ambiguous medium for articulating desire.

Peter Damian, himself, recognized his sinful linguistic playfulness. And it *was* considered sin. For example, in the *Pedagogus*, Clement of Alexandria assails *aischrologia*, foul speech. He also makes a maneuver that is familiar in the future discourse of sodomy: the sin, itself, is to be unnamed: “As becomes saints, let obscenity or foolish talk or scurrility not even be named among you.”¹⁸ In Letter 57 Damian confesses to a habit of scurrility and improper speech:

¹⁷ William E. Burgwinkle: “They might even have had the (perhaps quite deliberate) effect of instantiating a kind of interpellation in which men began to recognize themselves and their desires in these denunciations and to define themselves in relation to such categories.” See *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature*, p.22.

¹⁸ Clement makes one of the earliest and strongest associations of inordinate language with sexual irregularity (and with pederasty, in particular). This trope—the erotics of rhetoric—will persist throughout the Middle Ages.

For the same reason, our Educator has proscribed the too free use of certain terms, meaning to eliminate too free contact with immorality. Lack of restraint in the words we use gives rise to habitual disorderliness in actions, while to take pains

Nam ut me solum digne coarguam, videtis ipsi, quia, protinus ut ad vos venio, ecce sales, ecce facecia, lepores, urbanitates, dicacitates, volumina questionum omnes que verborum inanium pestes insolenter erumpunt, quae nos, non iam sacerdotes sed potius oratores ac rhetores, sive, quod in honestum est, scurras ostendunt.

And to accuse myself alone, as I deserve, you see that as soon as I come to you, there are at once witticisms, jokes, pleasantries, humorous remarks, railery, and rolls of questions; entire plagues of idling words immoderately erupt, which expose us not as priests but rather as orators and rhetors, or—which is more unseemly—as clowns.

Note Peter's pleonastic plasticity. His enumeration of the variety of verbal vices shows him victim of this very *virus*. What's more, in this profuse stream of words, I detect a decided sexual undercurrent. *Venio*, *errumpo*, and *ostendo* all have a sexual sense.¹⁹ *Insolenter* is “contrary to custom” and “immoderately.” Damian's text abounds in dubious turns of phrase.

Irregular *Verba*

Wordplay is figured as sex-play. In a discussion of *langage poetique*, Barthes considers the “play” allowed (encouraged!) by convoluted and obscure texts, like Gongora's: “Meaning and sex become the objects of free play, in the midst of which (polysemic) forms and (sensual) practices, freed from the binary prison, will reach a state of infinite expansion. In this way there

to be discreet in our language is to control licentiousness [. . .] In the same way, writings that treat of evil deeds must be considered indecent talk, such as the description of adultery or pederasty or similar things. (*Paedagogus*, 2.6.52)

Clement equates verbosity and perversity: “‘In the multitude of words,’ it is written, ‘there shall not want sin.’” Loquacity, the abundance of language, verbal facility and fecundity are markers of the effeminate, the sexually suspect, like Gongora and Llyl or Firbank and Corvo.

Guillaume Peyraut's *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* offers a thoroughgoing review of these sins. This section represents the metamorphosis of the handbook of rhetoric into the manual of penance.

¹⁹ For the sexual senses of *venio*, *rumpo*, *tendo* and their derivatives, see Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

can be born a Gongorine text and a happy sexuality.”²⁰ Larry Scanlon is the rare reader who recognizes this in Damian. However, when he writes of the “incidental wordplay of the sort of which Peter, the former rhetorician, was so fond” (Scanlon 39), he downplays the importance of the ludic. This is not *incidental* to, but constitutive of, the meaning of Damian’s text.

The very playfulness Damian condemns is embraced in his exculpation:

Mox enim, ut verba conserimus, paulatim quaedam lenocinia confabulationis alternae surripiunt, quae omnem animi rigorem indecenter emoliant, et severitatis robur in excussum risum et turpia ioca dissolvant. [. . .] Reprimo calatum. Nam ut turpiores attexantur ineptiae, pudore suffundor [. . .]

For as soon as we exchange verbal volleys, in the interchange of speech a certain allurement gradually takes hold of us in turn, which indecently softens all the rigor of judgment, and dissolves our sturdy severity into spurts of laughter and filthy jokes. [. . .] I restrain my pen. I am suffused with shame, lest more foul follies be added [. . .] (57.29)

Throughout, the preponderant imagery is of rigidity and detumescence. There is, for instance, the rough wood-hardness of *robur severitatis* which dissolves into *excussus risus*, where *excussus* may hint at the mechanism of relaxation—“shaking out.” Or “tossing off.” Peter emphasizes the dissolution of rigor and the emollient effect of language. Besides the softening evoked by *molli-*, comes the inevitable echo of *mollis*, the effeminate or catamite, reinforced by the well-known medieval use of *iocus* for homosexual horseplay. With *lenocinia confabulationis* the imagined confab is pictured as a bawdy (or molly) house. The “speech” of the participants is (at best) sexually exhausting, if not emasculating.

Language is sexually suspect. [*U*]t *verba conserimus* conflates two charged meanings: “to sow or plant” or “to intertwine, to join” words. The image is made more suggestive if we allow a

²⁰ Elsewhere, Barthes writes, “Polysemy poses a question of meaning, and this question always comes through as a dysfunction. [. . .] Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such ways as to counter the terror of uncertain signs[.]” See “Rhetoric of the Image,” p. 39.

misreading of *verba* for *verpa* here (and throughout the *Liber*). If the tongue is an obvious metonym for the penis, so is the pen. And Damian easily jumps from imagining the dangers of shared conversation to a vision of solitary vice: “*Reprimo calatum*,” he writes. “I put down my pen,” certainly, but also “I hold my cock in check” (*Lewis & Short* on *reproto*: “The figure borrowed from the restraining or confining of a stream”). And need we give a simple reading to *suffundor*? Again, “I blush” is the surface sense, but—given all that has gone before—can we ignore the *fluidity* that suffuses the word? Perhaps, “I pour over (or below)” or “I flow underneath.” This shameful effusion may be prompt the writer’s relinquishment of his implement. Damian’s reader is advised to entertain every nuance of his vocabulary.

Mixed Metaphors

Besides verbal equivocation, Damian also entertains ambiguity at the level of image, metaphor, and allegory. Consider his treatment of the biblical story of Sodom. Of Genesis’ chapter 19, Damian writes:

Cum justo Loth vim vehementissime facerent, jamque prope essent ut effringerent fores. Et ecce, inquit Scriptura, miserunt manum viri, et introduxerunt ad se Loth, claueruntque ostium, et eos, qui foris erant percusserunt cecitate a minimo usque ad maximum, ita ut ostium invenire non possent.

With that, they used furious violence against the upright Lot coming close to breaking through the door. But lo! (says Scripture) the men put out their hands, drawing Lot inside to them, and closed the door; and they struck the men outdoors, from least to greatest, with blindness so that they could not find the entrance.

The threat of the Sodomites’ sexual violence is latent in the Latin of the biblical “*Loth vim vehementissime facerent*.²¹ Adams (199) notes that *facio vim* connotes rape. But the response of the angels is no less suspect. This angels’ laying on of hands has its correlative in mutual

²¹ Damian actually differs from the Vulgate’s “*vimque faciebant Loth vehementissime*.”

masturbation in the cloister. Damian equates the Sodomites' intrusion with the seeking of divine office by sodomitical clerics: "*Sodomitae ergo ad angelos conantur violenter irrumpere, cum immundi homines ad Deum tentant per sacri ordinis officia propinquare*" (Consequently, sodomites attempt to violently break in on angels when impure men attempt to approach God through holy orders). There is confusion, however, when (of contemporary sodomites) he writes that "*ad Deum tentant*," which—because *tentare* ("to attempt") is separated from its main verb—invites initial misreading as "they touch" (especially since the angels' "hands" precede it) or "tempt" God. It is this sort of syntactical confusion that occasions much in *The Faerie Queene* by Spenser, another of the descendants of Damian.

Moreover, the biblical passage is overdetermined in its emphasis on the door (*fores...ostium...foris... ostium*). The repetition demands an accounting for the importance of the portal. A reader so attuned appreciates its sexual potential. The whole episode can be read as an allegory of an attempted male rape, a vivid (and necessary) presentation of an act which goes unnamed in Genesis. How otherwise are we to understand *what* is being punished? (Despite centuries of consensus, Genesis was not always interpreted as a story of same-sex desire. Early Jewish and Christian exegetes read it as a story of presumption and pride. Many contemporary critics have attempted to recuperate the biblical episode as an indictment of inhospitality.)

Damian constructs an expansive allegorical interpretation of the incident, in which fumbling about the door is equated with anal sex:

Quod ergo illic dicitur: "Percusserunt eos qui foris erant caecitate (Gen. XIX);"
hoc Apostolus manifeste declarat, cum dicit: "Tradidit eos Des in reprobum
sensum;" et quod illic subjungitur: "Ut ostium invenire non possent;" hoc etiam
patenter exponit, cum ait: "Ut faciant quae non convenient." Ac si diceret: ut
intrare tentent, unde non debent.

What was said elsewhere "They struck the men who were outside the door with blindness," the Apostle makes clear when he declares, "God surrendered them to

their reprobate inclinations [senses].” And when he connects “And they could not find the doorway,” to “So they might do what is not fitting,” he openly exposes the same thing. It is as if he were to say they try to enter a place they should not.

The “door” as anus is made explicit: “*ostium invenire*” (to find the door) is “*faci[o] quae non conveniunt*” (to do what is not fitting). *Convenio*’s primary meaning is “to come together,” “to join” and “to unite.” The notion of incongruous couplings is barely below the surface. These men do what is not fitting, insofar as their anatomies are not seen to “fit.” Or insofar as they choose an unconventional and inconvenient opening. (*Ostium* is an apt metaphor for the vagina or anus; the word was also used to refer to the mouth.) As if this were not enough he adds, “[*U*]t intrare tentent, unde non debent” (They try to enter where they ought not). Few recent critics have remarked on the peculiarity of this passage. David Lorenzo Boyd offhandedly remarks without further comment that, in Damian’s allegorical reading of Scripture, “the attempt of a sodomite to secure or maintain an ecclesiastical appointment is nothing less than an attempt to sodomize God Himself!”²² On the other hand, Larry Scanlon gives the passage the attention its peculiarity deserves. Elaborating on Boyd’s insight, he writes, “This scandalous possibility can hardly be considered inadvertent [. . .] Peter’s reading of the scene in front of Lot’s house makes sodomitical desire the literal equivalent to the desire of the original Sodomites to penetrate Lot’s door.”²³ The entire passage culminates in a comic image of sexual frustration:

Qui enim indignus ordine ad sacri altaris officium conatur irrumpere, quid aliud quam relicto januae limine, per immeabilem parietis obicem nititur introire? Et quia liber pedibus non patet ingressus, hi tales dum sibi spondent ad sacrarium posse pertingere, sua praesumptione frustrari coguntur potius in exteriori vestibulo remanere. El frontem quidem possunt in sacrae Scripturae saxa percutere, sed per divinae auctoritatis aditum nequaquam permittuntur intrare;

²² David Lorenzo Boyd, “Disrupting the Norm: Sodomy, Culture, and the Male Body in Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11, p. 63.

²³ Larry Scanlon, “Unmanned Men and Eunuchs of God: Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus* and the Sexual Politics of Papal Reform,” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997), p. 61.

atque dum ingredi, quo non sinuntur, attentant, nihil aliud faciunt, quam obtectum parietem inaniter palpant.

To be sure, one who is unworthy of holy orders and tries to break into the service of the altar does the same as he who abandons the obvious gateway and tries to enter through some impassible obstacle of the wall. Since such persons, moreover, are denied free access, while promising themselves that they will enter the sanctuary, they are forced to remain instead in the forecourt, frustrated in their presumption. They can go ahead and bang their head against the rocks of Holy Scripture, but they will never be able to enter by way of this divine authority. And while attempting to break in where they are not permitted, they can do nothing but vainly grope their way along the hidden walls.

The equation of the altar with the sexual parts is sacrilegious enough, but Damian goes further (too far?). What are we to make of this passage?

[...] ita ut nec ostium invenire praevaleant, quia a Deo peccando divisi, unde ad eum revertuntur ignorant. Qui enim non per humilitaiis, sed per arrogantiae, et tumoris anfractus ad Deum accedere gestiunt, patet profecto, quia unde unctionis aditus pateat non agnoscant; vel etiam quia ostium Christus est, !!! sicut ipse dicit: “Ego sum ostium.” Qui Christum peccatis exigentibus amittunt, quasi intrare coelestium civium habitaculum non possint, ostium non inveniunt.

[...] they are thus unable to find the door because in their separation from God by sin they do not know how to return to him. One who tries to reach God by the tortuous road of arrogance and conceit, rather than by the path of humility, will certainly fail to recognize the entrance that is obviously right before him, or even that the door is Christ, as he himself says: “I am the door.” Those who lose Christ because of their addiction to sin, never find the gate that leads to the heavenly dwelling of the saints.

Christ’s dictum “*Ego sum ostium*” becomes the jaw-dropping final element in an allegorical progression: the door is the anus; the door is Christ; ergo, Christ is the anus. In an image where the office is the orifice, the longing for clerical orders is likened to a sodomy whose object and site is Christ, Himself.

The Bible as *Vas Improrium*

Beside the appeal to verbal equivocation or metaphoric ambiguity, Damian resorts to a (perhaps?) more troublesome sort of misreading. His citation of Scripture—ostensibly intended to corroborate and authorize his anti-sodomitical rant—sometimes invite an equivocal reading. The ability to adopt biblical passages for their pornographic potential, shows a flexibility that goes beyond playfulness, and approaches blasphemy.²⁴ One sees this tendency—that is, the biblical allusion as obscene pun—in other authors, like Alain de Lille, especially in his *Distinctiones dictiōnum theologicarum*.²⁵ Many contemporary critics consider such a proposition unthinkable. Concerning the tribunal against the Templars, Anne Gilmour-Bryson (“Sodom and the Knights Templar,” p.176) writes,

The first witness in this hearing, Ranier of Larchent, had been received by John of Tours, treasurer of the order some twenty-six years earlier. Ranier offered uncommon evidence on the subject. He related that the psalm "*Ecce quam bonum et quam iocundum habitare fratres in unum*" was a coded message implying that the brothers might have sex with one another.

She dismisses the idea out of hand: “It stretches credibility to the utmost to see in one of the psalms an incitement to homosexual acts.” Yet in her discomfort Gilmour-Bryson ignores the obvious. She claims that holy men would be incapable of concocting such a blasphemous application of scripture.

²⁴ In his anatomy of humor, Quintilian advances this opinion: “Apt quotation of verse may add to the effect of the wit. The lines may be quoted in their entirety without alteration, which is so easy a task that Ovid composed an entire book against bad poets out of lines taken from the quatrains of Macer. Such a procedure is rendered especially attractive if it be seasoned by a spice of ambiguity.” (*Inst. Or.* VI.3.93)

²⁵ In my chapter on Alanus, I will employ this idiosyncratic dictionary, which finds every occasion to define sexually suggestive words from biblical passages.

But, if the Templars, themselves, were not guilty of this subornation of scripture, then their accusers were. And *they*, too, were holy men.²⁶

It may be no accident that—as many critics point out—Damian’s neologism “*sodomia*” is modeled on “*blasphemia*,” a connection he, himself, makes when he treats the severity of one by comparing it to the other:

Illud etiam addimus, quia si pessima est blasphemia, nescio, in quo sit melior sodomia. Illa enim facit hominem errare; ista perire. Illa a Deo animam dividit; diabolo ista conjungit. Illa de paradiſo ejicit; ista in tartarum mergit. Illa mentis oculos caecat; in ruinae voraginem ista praecipitat.

I may also add that if blasphemy is a most evil thing, I know not in what way sodomy is better. One indeed makes a man to err; the other, to perish. This separates the soul from God; that joins it to the devil. The former ejects a man from heaven; the latter plunges him into hell. One blinds the soul's eyes; the other hurls one into the abyss of ruin.

²⁶ Note: The psalm actually says “*decorum*,” not “*iocundum*.” The replacement of “seemly, proper” with “delightful, pleasant” may prop up the plausibility of the claim, especially if we recall the association of the Latin “*iocus*” with (homo)sexual play. A look at the short psalm (133) *in toto*:

Ecce quam bonum et quam decorum habitare fratres in uno
sicut unguentum optimum in capite quod descendit in barbam barbam Aaron
quod descendit super oram vestimentorum eius
sicut ros Hermon qui descendit super montana Sion quoniam ibi mandavit
Dominus benedictionem vitam usque in aeternum

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like a precious ointment upon the head, that runs down the beard, even
Aaron's beard that went down to the mouth of his garments;
As the dew of Hermon, which descends upon the mountains of Zion:
where the LORD sent His blessing: even life eternal.

The Hebrew for *unguentum* is the same word for oil: šemen, which means semen elsewhere (Song of Songs). Neither Adams nor Pierrugues attest *unguentem* as figure for semen, but *GELL* notes that *unguentatus* denotes a cinaedus. Besides the anatomical/sexual suggestiveness of *capite* and *oram*, there is *ros*, which is also loaded: it can mean “cum” as well as “dew.” Even *barba* may mean “mouth,” as can *caput* (see Adams, note p. 212). The Templars’ facial hair and mouths are dripping with semen, which is, after all, the conduit for life.

Once again, it is as if he recognizes the dangers of the tongue and conflates them with the perils of the prick, which may also be inordinate or out-of-place. In this passage we see the (by now) familiar tics of Damian—sexually suggestive vocabulary (*conjugo, mergo, perire, oculus* [with embedded *culus*], *caecat, ejico, tartarum* and *vorago*] and sexually suggestive imagery, overall (the conjugation, (sub)merging, ejection/ejaculation, and precipitation into holes or throats).

In my approach to Damian’s seminal text, I question a monochromatic assessment of this work. Whether by design or default, the *Liber* abounds in dubious turns of phrase. My close reading will demonstrate the poetic bent of the jeremiad, which embraces ambiguity, allowing for a scurrilous reading of what is so often seen as a puritanical text (like the *De Planctu Natura*, with which I see it sharing much). An examination of Damian’s vocabulary and a reconstruction of the metaphoric and exegetical nimbus in which he worked, will reveal a text that is precisely what it seems not to be.

Qualis Homo, Talis Sermo

In Clement of Alexandria’s *Paedagogus*, the church father advances a Christian philosophy of action, with great attention on public and private behavior. In the second book of this treatise, Clement turns his attention to the Christian body and its regulation. Chapter 1 begins with a diatribe on diet. He complains of “perversion of taste” that “degenerates into pleasures that only inflict harm,” and he enumerates the extravagance of gluttons’ menus. A man of this sort “seems nothing more than one great mouth.” He quotes the Pauline curse (1 Cor. 6.13) against “gluttonous desires.” Paul’s next sentence—“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but

for the Lord, and the Lord for the body”—shows how nearly the apostle equated immoderation of diet with sexual immorality. Clement follows him in this; gluttony and desire are connate.²⁷

Of course, it is in the same chapter of Corinthians, that Paul warns: “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *male prostitutes* nor *homosexual offenders* nor thieves nor the greedy nor *drunkards* nor *slanderers* nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” This conjunction of gluttony and evil speech and homosexuality is mirrored in Clement’s subsequent treatment, emphasizing associations of orality and immorality.²⁸

In Clement’s treatise—which some have criticized for its emphasis on *etiquette* rather than ethics—the author includes a chapter Περί αἰσχρολογίας (“On Filthy Speaking”). What might be seen today as a minor matter receives extended scrutiny. This need not surprise; Clement is following biblical precedent. Both testaments condemn the so-called “sins of the tongue.” Two—blasphemy and lying—make it into the ten commandments. Furthermore, Clement’s eponymous pedagogue is the divine Logos, so he takes particular interest in corruption of language:

We ourselves must steer completely clear of all indecent talk, and those who resort to it we must silence by a sharp look, or by turning our face away, or by what is called a grunt of disgust or by some pointed remark. ‘For the things that come out of the mouth,’ Scripture says, ‘defile a man, and reveal him as uncouth, barbaric, undisciplined, and unrestrained, and so completely without self-possession, decorum, or modesty. (2.6.49)

²⁷ In this, Chaucer’s Pardoner is a dedicated disciple. An earlier confusion of immodest language and immoderate intake occurs in Clement’s peculiar treatment of the communion *agape*, the feast of love. “If anyone dares mention the Agape with shameless tongue as he indulges in a dinner exhaling the odor of steaming meats and sauces, then he profanes the holy Agape.” In fact, he more than conflates food with language here; he equates them: “An *agape* is in reality heavenly food, a banquet of the Word.” (2.1.5)

²⁸ Cf. Matthew 15.17–19: “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, *adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*”

Note that indecorous speech is marked out here as uncouth, barbaric. Elsewhere, it will be set apart by its urbanity. Traditional invective against homosexuality runs a similar gamut; between its coarseness and animality to its refinement or sophistication. In Seneca's *Epistulae* we get an extended discussion of the interrelatedness of the erotic and rhetoric, how excess, refinement, or perversion in one is made evident in the verbosity, involution, obscurity and newfangledness (and, paradoxically, the archaicizing) of the other. Seneca begins his letter asking,

why, during certain periods, a degenerate style of speech comes to the fore, and how it is that men's wits have gone downhill into certain vices—in such a way that exposition at one time has taken on a kind of puffed-up strength, and at another has become mincing and modulated like the music of a concert piece. You wonder why sometimes bold ideas—bolder than one could believe—have been held in favor, and why at other times one meets with phrases that are disconnected and full of innuendo, into which one must read more meaning than was intended to meet the ear. Or why there have been epochs which maintained the right to a shameless use of metaphor. For answer, here is a phrase which you are wont to notice in the popular speech—one which the Greeks have made into a proverb: "Man's speech is just like his life."²⁹

Clement certainly knew Seneca, as well as Quintilian, an early Christian adopter of this trope. This accommodation of Roman stoicism in Christian doctrine is akin to one theme I want to pursue in my dissertation: how the classical Latin erotic vocabulary finds its way into the writings of medieval writers alongside (or in the guise of) Jerome's Vulgate Latin, with attendant confusion which complicates or amplifies meaning. We may ask, too, why certain *medieval* writers embrace the ambiguity of metaphor and innuendo.

²⁹ Letter 114. *Moral Letters to Lucilius* (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*), trans. Richard Mott Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 3 (1925). One paradox among many in Seneca: the erotic register for rhetorical error considers both effeminate speech to be both—simultaneously?—tumid and flaccid (*inflatus; infractus, enervatus*). Like many of the medieval authors I will examine, Seneca is guilty of those same sins he decries. Not surprising; the epistolist of stoic restraint is also the dramatist of mannerist excess.

Clement's attack is not aimed only at the active participant in conversation, but its passive recipient, as well. Besides the call to silence—the rein (or cockcage) on the tongue *as offending member*—he invokes auricular permeability, the penetration of the ears/arse:

And as a similar rule holds with regard to hearing and seeing in the case of what is obscene, the divine Instructor, following the same course with both, arrays those children who are engaged in the struggle in words of modesty, as ear-guards, so that the pulsation of fornication may not penetrate to the bruising of the soul.

An audience must be equipped with mufflers, or a sort of chastity belt for the ears. This language—which equates the actions of the tongue with a sort of aural rape—is not unusual in Clement. He uses the image of the “injured soul” in a discussion of temperance (2.2.20–21) which is positively turgid:

It is not well for flaming youth to be filled with the most inflammable of all liquids, wine, for that would be like pouring fire on fire. When they are under its influence, wild impulses, festering lusts, and hot-bloodedness are aroused; youths already on fire within are so much on the verge of satisfying their passions that the injury inflicted on them becomes evident by anticipation in their bodies, that is, the organs of lust mature before they should. I mean that, as the wine takes effect, the youths begin to grow heated from passion, without inhibition, and the breasts and sexual organs swell as a harbinger and an image of the act of fornication. The wound in their soul compels the body to manifest all the signs of passion, and the unrestrained throbbing aroused by temptation drive into sin the curiosity of him who before had been sinless. At this point, the freshness of youth has exceeded the bounds of modesty. Therefore, it is imperative to attempt to extinguish the beginnings of passion in the young, as far as possible: first, by excluding them from all that will inflame them—Bacchus and his threat—and second, by pouring on the antidote that will restrain the smoldering soul, contain the aroused sexual movements, and calm the agitation of the storm-tossed desires.

Note the excessive sexual imagery here. If a word's power to excite sensuality is granted, Clement's labile language is liable to induce those very “movements” and “desires” which he abhors. We must acknowledge the physical potential of aesthetic response which this prurient prose encourages, consciously or not. In doing so, we must entertain the idea that every sentence is a seduction. The bond between author and audience is not merely intellectual, but sexual. The

author creates a link with the reader, and every text is a *lectus*, that is, both a “reading” and a “bed.”

Clement’s emphasis on language is, perhaps, not surprising. This theoretical *qua* theological nexus of truth and language stems, no doubt, from the author’s belief in the identity of the two in the divine Logos, who is, after all, the “Instructor” here. Clement draws a strong connection between *words* and *deeds* and *things*. The Instructor, he says, “censures license in names [that is, *words*, the names of things], and thus cuts off the licentious intercourse of excess. For license in names produces the desire of being indecorous in conduct; and the observance of modesty in names is a training in resistance to lasciviousness.”³⁰ Words conjure images of things, which, in turn, incite to action. And where these words are “indecorous” or “unseemly,” their attendant actions are likely to be, as well. It is surprising, though, to see Clement distance himself from

³⁰ Clement seems to be one of those who are susceptible to (and therefore suspicious of) sensual provocations. He warns against music at banquets (“For revelry is an inebriating pipe”):

Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet, being more suitable to beasts than men, and the more irrational portion of mankind. For we have heard of stags being charmed by the pipe, and seduced by music into the toils, when hunted by the huntsmen. And when mares are being covered, a tune is played on the flute—a nuptial song, as it were. And every improper sight and sound, to speak in a word, and every shameful sensation of licentiousness—which, in truth, is privation of sensation—must by all means be excluded; and we must be on our guard against whatever pleasure titillates eye and ear, and effemulates. [1402]

In his chapter on “indecorous speech,” he advises, “The fruit of the temperament is words” (2.5.45) and “By the repetition of unbecoming words we lose all fear of unbecoming deeds.” This chapter, which deals with humorous speech and mockery, may have relevance for understanding the denouement of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Clement warns, “As for laughter, itself, it too, should be kept under restraint [. . .] but if it gets out of hand, it is a sure index of lack of self-control. If it is a question of indecencies, we should make it plain that we are blushing in shame, rather than smiling, lest we be thought to give consent and agreement. [. . .] Laughter can easily give rise to misunderstandings, particularly among boys and women.” (2.5.46–47)

this connection a few sentences on: “In a more profound discussion,” he writes, “we have shown that it is not the terms, or the sexual organs, or the marriage act, to which names not in common use describing intercourse are affixed, that we should consider obscene.”³¹

For the same reason, our Educator has proscribed the too free use of certain terms, meaning to eliminate too free contact with immorality. Lack of restraint in the words we use gives rise to habitual disorderliness in actions, while to take pains to be discreet in our language is to control licentiousness. It is not the knee, or the thigh, or the names given to them, or even the uses made of them, that is obscene. (In fact, even the private parts of a man’s body deserve to be treated not with prudery but with privacy.) It is only the unlawful use of these organs that is improper and that is to be considered shameful, and therefore deserving of punishment. [. . .] In the same way, writings that treat of evil deeds must be considered indecent talk, such as the description of adultery or pederasty or similar things. (2.6.52)

Clement has more to say about pederasty in his chapter Περί παιδοποίας (“On procreation”). Clement’s views on effeminacy, androgyny, and hermaphroditism (as figures for pederasty or homoerotic inclination) are a *locus classicus* of Christian homophobia. The proximity of his treatments of aischrology and pederasty may explain how these two ideas were also conflated by later writers (Alanus, de Meun)—who also borrow some of his imagery. Nature, Genius, and sexually anomalous animals all figure in Clement’s *Paedagogus*. These Clementine aspects will be explored in my chapters on *De Planctu Natura*. Clement can hardly bring himself to name the sexual organs—which would go a lot further in convincing the reader of his good faith. Instead, he opts for analogy and euphemism. The “knee” and the “leg” must be analogues for proximate parts of the body; otherwise, the mention of the “obscene” uses that they might be put to merely mystifies. And rather than naming the cunt or cock, Clement refers only to “the shameful parts.”

³¹ Where, exactly, Clement has done this is uncertain. It may be in a text which is lost to us. Some have suggested that he refers to his writing in the *Stromateis* II and III.

That said, this is a daring attempt to combine Christian teaching on aischrology—see Ephesians 5; Philippians 3.8; Galatians 5.12; and Colossians 3.8 and 4.6—with Stoic thought on obscenity.³²

Cicero, writing to Papirius Paetus, exemplifies the Stoic attitude toward language. “*Amo verecundiam*,” he says, “*tu potius libertatem loquendi* (I like coyness; you prefer speaking freely), to which he adds:

The latter I know was the doctrine of Zeno, a man by heaven! of keen insight, though our Academy had a serious quarrel with him. However, as I say, the Stoic doctrine is to call everything by its right name. They argue as follows: nothing is obscene, nothing unfit to be expressed: for if there is anything disgraceful in obscenity, it consists either in the thing meant or in the word: there is no third alternative. Now it is not in the thing meant. Accordingly, in tragedies as well as in comedies there is no concealment.

One editor notes that “*libertatem* could mean ‘freedom from the constraint of double entendre,’ as if Cicero had meant ‘I like a modest and simple use of language without suggestiveness.’”³³

³² Jeremy Hultin’s *The Ethics of Obscene Speech in Early Christianity and Its Environment* is an indispensable introduction to the thinking of Paul and Clement on the topic, and to their classical precursors. Along with Ziolkowski’s *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, it will inform my thinking on the role of obscenity in the medieval canon. Danuta Shanzer’s contribution to *Medieval Obscenities* (“Latin Literature, Christianity and Obscenity in the Later Roman West”) offers a thorough examination of post-classical Latin obscenity and its survival in various medieval genres: epigram, satire, biblical exegesis, religious polemic.

³³ See Evelyn Shuckburgh, *The Letters of Cicero* (1900) p. 293. Regarding appropriate speech and action, Cicero says elsewhere (in *de Officiis*, which must have been known to Clement and perhaps to our medieval authors):

But the propriety to which I refer shows itself also in every deed, in every word, even in every movement and attitude of the body. [. . .] First of all, Nature seems to have had a wonderful plan in the construction of our bodies. Our face and our figure generally, in so far as it has a comely appearance, she has placed in sight; but the parts of the body that are given us only to serve the needs of Nature and that would present an unsightly and unpleasant appearance she has covered up and concealed from view. Man’s modesty has followed this careful contrivance of Nature’s; all right-minded people keep out of sight what Nature has hidden and take pains to respond to Nature’s demands as privately as possible; and in the case

Clement concurs: “I admire the wisdom of the apostle when he advises us for this reason not to use words that are coarse or out of place.”³⁴

Prick Up Your Ears

Readers of the *Roman de la Rose* will recognize this peculiar maneuver, whereby a holy speaker converses in the coarsest way. In Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman*, the goddess Raison appears to the desolate Amant. She closes her discourse with this bit of lit-crit:

In our schools indeed they say many things in parables that are very beautiful to hear; however, one should not take whatever one hears according to the letter. In my speech there is another sense, at least when I was speaking of testicles, which I wanted to speak of briefly here, than that which you want to give to the word. He who understood the letter would see in the writing the sense which clarifies the obscure fable. The truth hidden within it would be clear if it were explained. You will understand it well if you review the integuments on the poets. There you will see a large part of the secrets of philosophy.

That de Meun is influenced by Christian writing on obscenity is patent. But where did he come by this particular conjunction of allegoresis with profane speech? One possible thread might be found in an obscure bit of classical Greek poetic theory preserved in a recently discovered manuscript. Especially noteworthy is the odd conjunction/similarity around the issue of the classical castration narrative as a site for allegorical interpretation and the leap—across time and language—that equates “genitalia” with “holy objects” in both texts. The hermeneutics of the Devenyi papyrus, its appreciation of the relation of interpretation to dubious (and double)

of those parts of the body which only serve Nature's needs, neither the parts nor the functions are called by their real names. To perform these functions—if only it be done in private—is nothing immoral; but to speak of them is indecent. And so neither public performance of those acts nor vulgar mention of them is free from indecency.

³⁴ This is echoed in de Meun’s chastisement of Reason for words which are *déplacés*.

speech, will inform my reading throughout, along with Carolyn Dinshaw's remarkable *Eunuch Hermeneutics*, to which it is a precursor. (A look at the Devenyi papyrus appears as the appendix to this dissertation.)

If I maintain that the queer impulse is a poetic impulse, I also want to advance a connection between obscene and poetic language, what Jakobson calls its “poeticity” and Ziolkowski sees as “its close proximity to the poetic function.” Furthermore, the use of obscenity can be seen as a type of resistance with particular appeal of the queer author and reader:

Where language is functioning obscenely, as obscenity, it is particularly well-equipped to reflect on the language system as such. The obscenity in fact appears to inveigh against the system itself: it cannot be located squarely on either the referential or the poetic end of the spectrum of language. Obscene language resides in an unusual poetic space of neither-norness that calls attention, ultimately, to certain (poetic) paradoxes and problems inherent in the language system.³⁵

So, the queer is the poetic; the obscene, the poetic; the queer, the obscene; and vice versa.³⁶

Building on the work of critics like Boswell, Dinshaw, Ziolkowski, and Leupin, I will examine texts that engage in irregular grammatical, metaphorical, or poetic practices to demonstrate that these behaviors should be seen as *sodomitical*. That is, insofar as certain textual practices are contrary to the “natural” laws of grammar or rhetoric, or logic and semantics, their queerness must be acknowledged and confronted. I maintain that these authors play with duality and dubiety (of diction) and ambiguity (of syntax or semantics), producing problematic, unsettling enactments of non-normative sexuality, even in those texts that purport to be (or have

³⁵ Leslie Dunton-Downer, “Poetic Language and the Obscene” in *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, edited by Jan M. Ziolkowski, p. 25.

³⁶ Ibid., p.23: “Obscenity may even be understood as a marker of culture, and culture as a combination of phenomena that necessarily incorporates the obscene, which is, in turn, able to work within culture in peculiarly reflective ways that include its apparent separateness from culture.” This paradox is familiar to certain queer curators of culture, who are simultaneously protectors and promoters of culture, even as they are alienated from it.

been taken to be) regulatory and normative. In fact, it is *particularly* in those texts which inveigh against sinful sexuality (*Hamartigenia*, *Liber Gomorrhianus*, *De Planctu Natura*, *Clannesse*) or seemingly model *fin amour* (*Troilus and Criseyde*, *Roman de la Rose*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) that a queer reading may be most productive and rewarding—accomodating the homoerotic or homosexual.³⁷

Unstuck in Time

Madhavi Menon has done something similar on rhetoric and sexuality in Shakespeare with *Wanton Words*. (She, in turn, expands on the insights of Martin Green's early queer wanderings in *The Labyrinth of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.) I want to explore the same nexus of rhetoric and eros—Menon's "mutual imbrication of language and sexuality"—in the Middle Ages through an playful close reading that proliferates semiotic potentialities. In my recruitment of these texts for a modern queer interpretation, I will not escape the charge of anachronism. ("The critic may not (must not) activate concepts and categories which were unavailable (therefore, unthinkable) to these authors.") Deriving license from a new wave of queer medievalists and early modernists, I embrace anachronism. Prolepsis is a means whereby we may enjoy queer touches across centuries.³⁸ Literature is not a unidirectional exercise in which an author projects his text outward through space and time, with the hope that it will reach its intended target. The reader, too, participates, in effect, retrojecting his intentions on the text (if not the author). I will not be

³⁷ See *Four-Letter Word Games: The Psychology of Obscenity*, by Renatus Hartogs and Hans Fantel (cited by Ziolkowski, page 4) where obscenity is "viewed as the counter-code to whatever orthodoxy prevails." (But what does this mean for Peter Damian, in expounding an orthodoxy that encodes obscenity?)

³⁸ The past is *not* another country; they do things similarly there.

afraid of or "queer temporality" nor this "queer historical impulse to make connections across time" (Dinshaw). Is our aim to locate antecedents to the modern? Why not continuities? As Medhavi Menon makes clear, to do so is to conform to a hetero-temporal orthodoxy every bit as inhibiting as sexual supervision. Just as we now accommodate an idea of transnational queerness, we must pioneer a transtemporal homosexuality (or, insofar as ours is not the first foray into this territory, we must be pilgrims in this homotemporal holy land).³⁹

[A] discussion of "sexuality in the Renaissance, far from being anachronistic, is strongly marked by theoretical ideas about language that were in circulation at the time. The handbooks of rhetoric, whose aim it is to define linguistic effects, end up by describing sexual effects that offer a surprising insight into the nature and conception of early modern desire. Such an insight forces us to move back "our" boundaries of sexuality, and to move forward "their" ideas of language. Above all, it compels us to modify the way in which we speak of the history of sexuality.⁴⁰

By defying and denying the legal, medical, and historical authority (or priority) for representations of sexuality (or, indeed, the personal experience of sex), we can approach these texts more freely, engaging them on our terms as well as their own. What's more, it broadens the range of discourses which are deemed legitimate (I shudder at the word) for the understanding of

³⁹ With Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, we have become unstuck in time.

⁴⁰ *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, University of Toronto Press (2004), p.4. Expanding on the perception of Jonathan Goldberg that rhetorical handbooks "align their subject matter with issues that deal with unregulated bodily desire" and that both are "incapable of exact definition," Menon writes: "Questions of precise terminology have been at the heart of debates on sexuality." Taking up arms against Alan Bray (and the unnamed Foucault and Halperin) and the authorizing of the terms "sodomy" and "homosexuality" for different and definite historical conceptions, Menon parries: "This difference in terminology has in turn been taken to indicate a conceptual difference between sexual regimes, marking the Renaissance as forever alienated from the present day, and opening an area of inquiry in which 'sodomy' is treated differently from 'homosexuality.' But this notion of conceptual and practical difference reckons without the rhetorical formulation of sexuality, the differential structuring of words, *both now and then*. Even as terminology is accepted as the marker of difference between sexual regimes, insufficient attention is paid to terms themselves" (p. 5–6).

sexuality and subjectivity. After all, which has a stronger claim to encompassing the personal experience of desire, the lyric or the law? The reading chair may eventually displace (not, replace) the bench, the pew, and the examination chair.

Hermaphroditic Epideictics

Camp, a supposedly contemporary phenomenon, might be a useful way of thinking about these medieval and early modern texts and audiences.⁴¹ It certainly accommodates the *irony* and *double entendres* that have more recently (if reluctantly) been recognized in some of these texts. Here, in my fiddling with these texts, I intend to push back against queer quislings who deny (and defend against) the possibility of pre-modern homosexualities—personal or communal erotic identification, whether affirmation or accusation. Camp, it is claimed, also has this property: though encoded speech, it is immediately intelligible even to the uninitiated queer. (“It is characteristic of the special nature of the semantics of gay life that the peculiar usage of words in a given context is readily understandable even to those who have never before encountered them. . . ”)⁴² It is perhaps this camp sensibility which alerts me to the polysemantic possibilities in my medieval texts. They have, as it were, “dropped their beads.”

⁴¹ Camp has been defined as ““To speak, act, or in any way attract or attempt to attract attention, especially if noisily flamboyantly, bizarrely, or in any other way calculated to announce, express, or burlesque one’s own homosexuality or that of another person.”(Gershon Legman, “The Language of Homosexuality: An American Glossary” in *The Language and Sexuality Reader* (ed. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick) p.22. Camp is that peculiar queer practice which both veils and reveals. I am reminded of Ruth Tiefenbrunn’s observation: “Kafka shares with his fellow deviants their most distinctive trait: their simultaneous need to conceal themselves and to exhibit themselves.”

⁴² Donald W. Cory, “Take My Word for It” in *The Language and Sexuality Reader*, p. 38. Cory refers to the homosexual as “bilingual.” Like others with double consciousness, the homosexual operates within and without the hegemonic language regime. Writing on Augustine’s interpretive community, Markus writes, “But one will have to belong to a further, perhaps a secondary

Homosexual cant can be used to escape detection, but also to signal one's presence. Just as language is often an identifying marker of nationality or culture, it can constitute a subcultural identity. Coded language (whether polari or allegory) encloses—it encloisters, protects, and constructs a defensive barrier. Decoded language has the potential to open these texts to new community of queer or questing or questioning readers.⁴³ It is not only “adhesive” but “cohesive.” It is a more subtle means of signaling status. Like the semaphore of the hanky code.

Burgwinkle refers to the modes of being queer that secrecy and the closet produce: irony and camp. He builds on D.A. Miller's notion of secrecy and subjectivity: “[S]ecrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance: a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order, a margin to which its far-reaching discourse does not reach.”⁴⁴ Saying that “operations of secrecy and divulgence are very much at play” in these

linguistic, or let us say textual, or even interpretive, community, or to more than one.” (Markus 33)

⁴³ Victor Hugo, on *argot* as “a nation and a dialect” performs an extended anatomy of slang:

There exists, at the extremity of all abasement and all misfortunes, a last misery which revolts and makes up its mind to enter into conflict with the whole mass of fortunate facts and reigning rights; a fearful conflict, where, now cunning, now violent, unhealthy and ferocious at one and the same time, it attacks the social order with pin-pricks through vice, and with club-blows through crime. To meet the needs of this conflict, wretchedness has invented a language of combat, which is slang. Slang is nothing but a dressing-room where the tongue having some bad action to perform, disguises itself. There it clothes itself in word-masks, in metaphor-rags. In this guise it becomes horrible. It is black in misfortune, it is blacker still in crime; these two blacknesses amalgamated, compose slang. Obscurity in the atmosphere, obscurity in acts, obscurity in voices. (*Les Misérables*, VII.1)

⁴⁴ *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.9. Burgwinkle misidentifies the quote as Burger's, found in *Chaucer's Queer Nation*. (It is from “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets” in *The Novel and the Police*, University of California press 1988, p. 207.) Burgwinkle (p. 10) supports his claim with Ed Cohen's: “[A] marginalized poet can speak and write in the dominant discourse but subvert its monolithic truth claims by recasting them in the light of personal, subculture experience.”

medieval texts, and one can imagine that speech *as act* can figure and perform queer sexuality.

Of this “double-consciousness” Burgwinkle writes: “[it] is also a fixture of allegory, and it is therefore fully consonant with medieval aesthetics,” and he concludes, “Any answer to these questions has to begin with what appears to me to be an open invitation on the part of many twelfth-century authors to read their texts actively, to revel in their word play, ambiguity, and deliberate obscurity.” The degree to which this “resistance” can be imagined as “friction” lets us imagine the reading of these texts as verbal frottage.

Although in the past I have lumped David Halperin among the *collabos*, for his early evangelizing, his more recent work has been therapeutic in its ecumenism.⁴⁵ His latest, *How to Be Gay* is particularly useful for my thinking about medieval queerness. His looking at the nature and formation of gay male subjectivity through gay men’s “appropriation and reuse of works from mainstream culture and their transformation of those works into vehicles of gay sensibility and gay meaning” resembled what I was doing in the repurposing of my medieval authors—and in their own magpie borrowing and use of prior texts (classical, biblical, and contemporary). And if Halperin’s attitudes have changed, so have mine. I have softened my insistence on essentialism, and like Halperin I now want to “shed light on and to provide a non-psychological account of it, by approaching homosexuality as a social, not an individual, condition and as a cultural practice rather than a sexual one.”

[H]omosexuality is not just a sexual orientation but a cultural orientation, a dedicated commitment to certain social or aesthetic values, an entire way of being. What this implies is that it is not enough for a man to be homosexual in order to be gay. Same-sex desire alone does not equal gayness. "Gay" refers not just to something you are, but also to something you do. Which means that you

⁴⁵ I don’t know if Halperin has undergone a conversion, but one can trace a sort of Damascene road, from constructionism to essentialism (from acts to identities) in the titles of his works. From “How to Do” to “How to Be.”

don't have to be homosexual in order to do it. Gayness is not a state or condition. It's a mode of perception, an attitude, an ethos: In short, it is a practice.

This complicates the notion of homosexuality as an "act," not an identity, essence. And while its attention to *praxis* still posits homosexuality as an ethical problem, his emphasis on culture and perception and modes acknowledges it to be an aesthetic one, as well. Halperin decries the Internet's role in destroying the "queer public space"—by which I assume he means queer geographic space.⁴⁶ But it may just as well be seen as a technology that creates such a space—one that is immune to age, economic status, and beauty as erotic capital. Just as an earlier technological innovation—the book—can also be seen to foster community beyond geographically confined limits.

Halperin also decries the increased homogeneity of gay culture. What he actually laments is that certain homosexuals do not want to participate in "gay culture" but instead want access to the institutions that are enjoyed and endorsed by the heterosexual majority: "military service, church membership, and marriage." (He might also add job and housing security, healthcare, and freedom from physical assault.) In the pose of political crusader, he seems willing to sacrifice the happiness and safety of his brethren, in pursuit of his higher ideals of sophistication and refinement (and, just perhaps, the myth that these are peculiar to homosexuals). It is a pose of gay exceptionalism (not essentialism). For me, it is a welcome sign of the changing times that—

⁴⁶ Lauren Berlant once argued for the appropriation of private property in the interest of the gay community. (She bemoaned the lack of public space for young, black gay men in a transforming Greenwich Village.) I argued at the time that electronic spaces were already transforming gay spaces, and that the need for such locales was increasingly passé. Thanks to Craigslist and Grindr, the hustler bar has disappeared. One no longer goes out to contact a male prostitute. Think of the influence of the telephone in the production of the "call girl." The Internet no doubt also increased the number of young men who engaged in this behavior—and also, I am sure, increased their presence outside the "city" itself. Prostitution no longer needed the economic hub of bar or brothel to make the operation financially possible or "safe."

to connect with gay life in New York today—I now look at the wedding announcements of the *New York Times*, rather than the obituaries.

“Both homosexuality and heterosexuality are artifacts of the same socio-sexual system, a system largely coincident with modernity (It is only in the last three hundred years or so that boys have started becoming one or the other [that is, hetero or homosexual].” Halperin here walks back his idea of 100 years of homosexuality, privileging the renaissance with the rise of subjectivity and sexuality. Why not push back modernity to the middle ages (where we see self-conscious writers)? Why not, for all that, push back sexuality and subjectivity to the west’s earliest expressions of either, archaic Greek poetry?⁴⁷

On the *meaning* of style, Halperin observes,
[W]ithin the society in which we live, the exact arrangement and design of shapes, thicknesses, curves, colors and other stylistic features, however abstract and non-representational they may be, participate in a specific and highly loaded cultural semantics, . . . [T]hey become bearers of a complex cultural symbolism in which gender and sexuality are implicated. Style is saturated with meaning, including sexual and gendered meaning.

Compare this understanding of camp with Detienne’s conception of interpretation:

[Exegesis] is the incessant commentary that a culture makes on its symbolism, its gestures, its practices, on all that constitutes it as a system in action.

⁴⁷ I think it relevant that in the lyric both love and self are seen to inform our understanding of the other. In some, the poetic ego is constituted by that very love. Anacreon’s

I love Cleobulus,
I am mad about Cleobulus,
I gaze at Cleobulus.

tells us more about Anacreon than it ever can about Cleobulus. (Love is never about its object.) The problem of the self in the *Anacreonta* is a minor industry in classical philology. I leave it to my betters to argue that the lyric above is not personal (because *prior to the self*) but political, an attempt to formulate an ethic of communal aristocratic bearing. Keeping with my theme of the author’s sense of the power of words to excite or seduce (what is rhetoric if not the art of moving or persuading others), I note that Anacreon wrote: “Boys ought to love me on account of the way I talk, for I sing charming things, and I know how to say charming things.” It is unclear whether this is a boast or a lament. (To say they should love him is not to say they do, alas.)

Exegesis proliferates from inside; it is speech which nourishes that tradition of which it is a part, whereas interpretation emerges the moment there is an outside perspective, when some in society begin to question, to criticize the tradition, to distance themselves with regard to the histories of the tribe.⁴⁸

R.A. Markus wants to underline a distinction between exegesis and interpretation in Augustine, which it may be useful to engage when looking at medieval texts. “Exegesis remains confined within the framework of the discourse of the text, whereas interpretation may range more widely, even outside the kind of discourse determined by the nature of text being interpreted.” For this reason, I like to frame my own work as an act of interpretation.

Whatzit

In the Bible Solomon and the Queen of Sheba were said to have engaged in a riddlic exchange—a test of knowledge (and display of power) and, possibly, an erotic pastime or pas-de-deux. No example of their riddles is given in the Book of Kings, but tradition holds that one of Sheba’s teasers was a numerical conundrum concerning certain Sodomites. This appears as Riddle 46 in the *Exeter Book*, one of the few to have clear continental origins. The *Exeter Book* Riddles are the only Old English examples we have of this playful enterprise. The form was widespread during the Middle Ages, and many examples survive in Latin. The most important collection is that of Symphosius, whose anthology of 100 riddles was broadly disseminated and copied. Aldhelm composed a “century” of riddles, for example. And the *Exeter Book* riddles probably numbered 100 originally, too.

⁴⁸ M. Detienne, “Rethinking Mythology” (in *Between Belief and Transgression: Structuralist Essays in Religion, History, and Myth*, ed. M. Izard and P. Smith (Chicago, 1982)) p. 48. (Quoted in Markus, p. 38).

Riddle 46 runs:

Waer saet aet wine mid his wifum twam
ond his twegen suno ond his twa dohtor,
swase gesweostor, ond hyra suno twegen,
freolico frumbearn; faeder waes þaer inne
þara aefelinga aeghwaeðres mid,
eam ond nefas. Ealra waeron fife
eorla ond idesa insittendra.

A man sat at wine with his two wives
And his two sons and his two daughters,
Dearest sisters, and their two sons,

Noble first-born boys; the father of each
Was in there amidst the princes,
Uncle and nephew. In all there were five
Men and women sitting within.

A straightforward mathematical approach would reckon one man + two wives + two sons + two daughters + their two sons + their two fathers to total eleven revelers. At least. If we calculate “*hyra suno twegen*” (their two sons) as referring to the offspring of each daughter, then the final tally is thirteen. But people do not occupy single niches in relational charts or family trees. Like polysemous words, they do double-duty, they multi-task. To embody these eleven relationships in only five individuals, we must allow that the wives may be daughters, and that a father may be a husband (or, in this case, two) to his daughters, and that a man’s daughters’ sons may be his own. One man, two women, two boys. This mind-fuck math makes sense if we consider the possibility of incest. The intimate family is Lot’s—having fled Sodom and lost his nostalgic wife, his daughters conspired to get him drunk to have sex with him, to repopulate the diminished world.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Four of the five “cities of the plain” were destroyed by fire: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim. Bela escaped their fate. Lot’s daughters were too quick to imagine a general worldwide conflagration. Why they should have had this idea is peculiar, having travelled to the mountain from Zoar-Bela, the surviving city.

Behind the convivial family get-together, we discover a sordid, incestuous symposium. The anodyne “*aet wine*” recalls the extremity of Lot’s inebriation—two nights of alcoholic blackout: “*et ne tunc quidem sensit quando concubuerit, vel quando illa surrexerit*” (And he neither knew when she had sex with him, nor when she rose to leave). And the softening of this sin entirely occludes the more serious crime of incest.

The reader’s reasoning is hindered by the proliferation of twos: *twam, twegen, twa, twegen*. This is only apt, for it is doubleness that produces and multiplies doubt. As it happens, *two* is the Anglo-Saxon word for a doubtful state of things, state of indecision. As with my chapters on Latin texts, I want to play with the dubiety exploited in the Exeter Book riddles—not at the level of the word (as pun or double entendre) but of the deed, the fact and the artefact, the twinning and twining of sexual objects and actions with less libidinous processes or products. While not pursuing the verbal metaphor, *per se*, the riddles show us how to think hermaphroditically, to link two mental entities together in an an erotic nexus, as if every reading exercise is a swim in Salmacis’ waters.

Riddles may have appealed to what Oscar Wilde recognized as a medieval trait when he wrote of “[m]ysticism, with its marvellous power of making common things strange to us.” My reading of the obscene riddles of the Exeter Book will show how they aestheticize the reader—in effect, giving him new organs of sense. (As should all poetry.) Like those pictures which magnify familiar objects to look like—what? Moonscapes and monsters. Riddles, then, deal in the sensual, the descriptive. But to the medieval mind these were always *accidents*; they did not get at the essence of a thing, its being. Beyond the real lays the surreal, the ideal, the unreal, and the unnatural, as well. (Many of these poems interest me because they seem to engage questions of unnatural, irregular, or unorthodox sexuality.) Riddles can be seen as instruments of

regulation, they control and correct of knowledge, even carnal knowledge. The medieval riddle was used to teach, but also amuse (as *joca seria*), and one can imagine the reading of riddles in the dining hall of the cathedral community. They are convivial, but there seems to be implicit danger surrounding social and sexual relaxation.

Liberating the *Liber Gomorrhianus*

Some texts have been less susceptible to queer readings; others, altogether anathema. Regarding the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, for instance, queer scholars seem to react like the hero of *Time Bandits* to the contaminated coal. “Don’t touch it,” they urge. “It’s Evil!” No doubt, this is owed, in part, to the general ignorance surrounding a text which—*because everyone knows what’s in it*—no one bothers to read. Of course, this text has enjoyed a renewal of interest lately, because the current scandal of pedophilia within the Catholic Church has sent us to its preeminent chronicler.⁵⁰ Some hope to find in this Doctor of the Church a useful guide for the treatment of the diagnosed illness. (Ex-Pope Benedict XVI holds Peter Damian in special regard, yet he was

⁵⁰ The recognition of sexual abuse of minors as a problem was recognized in the emergent church. These were not proscriptions on adult same-sex unions. Although how these might be accommodated by a doctrine which demonized extramarital sex is still a dilemma. Samuel Laeuchli proposes a political dimension behind this, as the church hierarchy attempts to distinguish itself from the sexual practices of the crumbling Roman empire. The *Didache* (ca. 120 CE) advises, “Thou shalt not seduce young boys” (*paidophthoreseis*). (In the same injunction we are also warned against evil speech and double-speak (*kakologesein* and *diglossia*.)) And in 309 CE the Council of Elvira, the earliest synod for which we have records, imposed strict punishment—excommunication even until death—on “those who sexually abuse boys” (Canon 71: *Stupratoribus puerorum nec in finem dandam esse communionem*.) See *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (1972) by Samuel Laeuchli and *Sex, Priests, and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis* (1995) by A. W. Richard Sipe. In a letter to the former pope, Sipe cast himself as a latter-day Damian, writing: “I approach Your Holiness with due reverence, but with the same intensity that motivated Peter Damian to lay out before your predecessor, Pope Leo IX, a description of the condition of the clergy during his time. The problems he spoke of are similar and as great now in the United States as they were then in Rome.” (Letter of April 24, 2008)

even less apt than Leo IX to visit punishment on offending priests.) Others, in pointing out the persistence of the problem, find an unlikely ally in Damian, who points a finger at traditions (and innovations) within the Church as causes for (or incitements to) sin. Extirpation, they advise, must come at the head, not the root. While we still shudder at the reverberations from the calamitous clamor of Damian's voice, I think much can be gained if we turn again to his words, themselves.

It has been suggested that the obscurity of the *Liber Gomorrhianus* is a result of Leo's unfriendly response to the letter. Not quite a rebuke, it *was* a rebuff. Admonishing the priggish proto-saint, he declares: "We, acting more humanely, desire and ordain [that these sinners recover their ranks.]" Without the force of the Pope behind him, Damian's suggestions were not promulgated. It remains a question how the text—including its quadripartite division of *sodomia*—found its way into certain learned discourse and subsequent formulations of the sin. (It seems that, for a time, at least, Damian, himself could not lay hands on his own text, having lent his only manuscript to a clerical colleague who was loth to part with it.)⁵¹

If my reading of the text holds, one will be forced to ask whether Leo recognized the ambiguity of the text. His commendation of Damian's decorous prose (*honesto quidem stylo*) may, in fact, be an ironic acknowledgement of its suspect decoration (and duplicity)—virtuosity masquerading as virtue. When Leo states, "*Tales nimirum clerici etsi non verborum, tamen operum testimonio profitentur, quia non existunt, quod censem*" (If not by words, at least by the evidence of their actions such clerics profess that they are not what they are thought to be) perhaps he hints that he knows that it is the *words*—not the clerics—which "are not what they

⁵¹ This may be telling. Perhaps, at least one early reader recognized the salacious potential of the text. In its recondite ribaldry, could it have been one of those books *qu'on ne peut lire que d'une main?*

are thought to be.” He notes elsewhere that he must interpose his apostolic authority lest any “scrupulous uncertainty” arise among the letter’s readers (*oportet, sicut desideras, apostolicam nostram interponamus auctoritatem, quatenus scrupulosam legentibus auferamus dubietatem.*) It is precisely this *dubietas*—doubt and doubleness—that I want to pursue.

Fear of a Queer *Planctu*

Of Alanus’ *De Planctu Naturae*, Larry Scanlon writes: “There is no mistaking the work’s penitential and regulatory ambitions.” He continues, “The *De Planctu* along with Alain’s other writings, and their historical context all make it clearly evident that Alain was a supporter and perhaps even an instigator of the twelfth-century Church’s repression of homosexuality.”⁵² However, the form of the text would suggest that Alain *did not* have a preacherly program. In his *Summa de arte praedicatoria (The Art of Preaching)*, Alain writes:

Preaching should not contain jesting words, or childish remarks, or that melodiousness and harmony which result from the use of rhythm or metrical lines; these are better used to delight the ear than edify the soul. Such preaching is theatrical and full of buffoonery, and in every way to be condemned. Of such preaching the prophet says: “Your innkeepers mix water with wine.” Water is mingled with wine in the preaching in which childish and mocking words—what we might call “effeminacies”—are put into the minds of the listeners. Preaching should not glitter with verbal trappings, with purple patches...⁵³

How should we take Alain’s condemnation of the metrical, melodious and mocking; the purple, playful and poetic? Aren’t these apt descriptions of *De Planctu Naturae*? If this is a catalogue of effeminacies, Alain’s text is *flaming*. In addition, *De Planctu Naturae* is a prosimetrum, modeled

⁵² In “Unspeakable Pleasures: Alain de Lille, sexual regulation and the priesthood of Genius” in *The Romanic Review* Vol. 86 Issue 2, March (1995) p. 219.

⁵³ *The Art of Preaching*. Trans. Gillian R. Evans, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications (1981) p 18.

on Boethius, Martianus Capella, and Bernardus Sivestrus. This is startling, considering the author's abuse elsewhere (*Anticlaudianus* 51) of the "patchwork poetry" of Ennius. The *De Planctu* is necessarily "mixed;" it combines two natures. Since it seems to condemn hybridity, this mode of composition is problematic. Or, it may be a happy conjunction of form and function. This text which examines the twofold sexual nature of man, is itself double-natured.⁵⁴ Gender is genre.

In a similar vein, Tison Pugh in *Queering Medieval Genres* maintains, "Certainly, such authors as Peter Damian, Alain de Lille, and the *Gawain*-poet vilify homosexuality unequivocally." (Pugh, 11) I would like to argue for an equivocal reading, at least of the *poetic* aspects of these authors, for poetry is by nature—or necessity—ambiguous. It is presumably in *Clannesse* that the critic sees blanket condemnation by the English poet, since Pugh, himself, devotes considerable space to a queer reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I'd like to do something similar with *De Planctu Naturae*, which I believe is far from the unalloyed sermon against Sodomy that many see.

In analyzing this remarkable text, I'd like to look at both the *matter* and the *manner* of *De Planctu Naturae*. I believe that the careful reader can discern an ambiguous attitude toward this topic both in *what* it says and the *way* in which it is said. This will be aided by glancing at Alain's glossary, the *Liber in Distinctionibus Dictionum Theologicalium*. This text, although itself a work of prose, has much to tell us about Alain's poetical project and practice, for it is a systematic examination of poetic language and the construction (or deduction) of textual

⁵⁴ As preaching tract, the *De Plantu* may be ill-designed to appeal, but it may be ideally suited to reveal. What if its purpose is not penitential, but confessional? That, after all, must precede penance.

meanings.⁵⁵ Finally, I also entertain questions about the “queer” enterprise, in general. For my investigation led me to some unforeseen conclusions regarding *De Planctu* and de Lille’s priestly project.

Regarding *De Planctu Natura*, what is the matter? Briefly, it’s a (late) twelfth-century dream narrative which recounts the protagonist’s lament on the regrettable condition of the world as a result of sodomy (*plus ça change*), and his subsequent visitation by the figure of Natura, who likewise laments the sexual irregularity of mankind. The work concludes with the peculiar “remedy” provided by Genius, the spirit of generation. None of these characters—dreamer, Nature, nor Genius—is a whole-heartedly unambiguous figure. It is, to some extent, their condition as figures which renders them dubious.

None dispute what is the offense railed against in these pages: A *Venus monstrosa*⁵⁶ which “changes hes into shes, and with her witchcraft unmans man.” A name for this “monstrosity” is never provided, and the author and his spokesfigures expend considerable effort and ingenuity in speaking around it. Alain employs figurative language drawn from the schoolroom or scriptorium (grammar, orthography) and from the factory and farmyard (anvil, ploughshare). We will have to look at this circumlocution to get a clearer idea of the roles of rules and tools in Alain’s text.

⁵⁵ Commonly called the *Distinctiones*. I use the edition of Migne in the *Patrologia Latina* database. This text does not exist in English. All translations are my own.

⁵⁶ In Alain’s *Distinctiones* a “monster” is described as “*res praeter cursum naturae*,” that is, a thing outside (or beyond) the course of nature. It could also serve as a translation of “metaphysical” (from Greek *meta*, beyond, and *phusis*, nature.) As examples of the preternatural Alain gives “*animal biceps vel triceps*” or a “*homo bicorpor*.” The exact nature of the suggested human oddity is unclear: is this conjoined twins, or a hermaphrodite? (*Corpus* can mean the sexual aspect of the body). It has this meaning in Bernardus Silvestris’ *Cosmographia*: “Epicene and sexually promiscuous in his general behavior, he has learned to create hermaphrodites of bicorporeal shape.” (See Burgwinkle, page 102, note 71.)

In lacrymas risus, in fletum gaudia verto:
In planctum plausus, in lacrymosa jocos,
Cum sua naturam video secreta silere,
Cum Veneris monstro naufragia turba perit.
Cum Venus in Venerem pugnans, illos facit illas:
Cumque suos magica devirat arte viros.
Non fraus tristitiam, non fraudes fletus adulter
Non dolus, imo dolor parturit, imo parit.⁵⁷

I turn to tears from jests; from joys to lamentation;
To a plaint from applause; and from games to grievances.
When I see Nature sideline her secrets,
When shipwrecked throngs are lost to a monstrous Venus,

When Venus wars with Venus, making “hes” into “shes,”
Whose sorcery unmans her men.
No illusion begets this sadness; nor counterfeit weeping, deceit.
It isn’t guile, but anguish that is in labor—no, is giving birth.

Alain de Lille begins his *De Planctu Naturae* on an appropriately elegiac note, which turns on the notion of “turning.” “*In lacrymas risus... verto*” (I turn from laughter to tears). This poet’s verse is perverse, a turning away. (Also a turning of the back—a position which makes at least one homosexual act possible.) This note of conversion is sounded and compounded again in Alain’s description of an artful Venus, who “changes *hes* into *shes*” (*illos facit illas*) and “with her magic art unmans man” (*Cumque suos magica devirat arte viros*). There is, perhaps, the hint that the art in question here is poetry, itself, with the poet as quintessential sexual deviant. For, as Alain explains, “*Non fraus tristitiam, non fraudes fletus adulter / Non dolus, imo dolor parturit, imo parit*” (It is not a case of pretence begetting a show of grief or faked tears giving birth to deceit; it is not an act. But rather an ache that is in labour or, rather, actually giving birth). Alain’s poetry is parturition; the poet, himself, is the unmanned man that he laments. Alain goes

⁵⁷ *De Planctu Naturae*, by Alanus ab Insulis. Found in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne. Col. 0431A. I use the online edition found at: www.thelatinlibrary.com/alanus/alanus1.html. Henceforward, citations for this text will appear in the body of my text. Translations are my own. I hope my pedantic or plodding productions will be pardoned.

into labor to bring forth his poem, he “gives birth” to this work.⁵⁸ In this first stanza of Alain’s work, he gives us a figure of the poet as unnatural man. Alain’s lament, then, may have its genesis in his recognition of personal lapse, and his revulsion may be at the sin *within*, rather than around, him.

With this image of masculine birth, the classically inclined conjure up the image of Minerva sprung from the head of Zeus. But one also recalls the image of Venus sprung from the castrated penis of Saturn, which brought an end to the Golden Age, an image of the Fall, which has more bearing on Alain’s work here.⁵⁹ Later in the poem Nature will admonish the dreamer: “*et si quae prava semina in horto/tuae mentis audeant pullulare, falce maturae sectionis/ extirpes.*”⁶⁰ Here the insemination of the (male) mind is made explicit. That the mind is a *hortus* is doubly telling; besides garden, the word means both *pudendum muliebre* and the *posterior* of a boy. Nature’s recommendation for treatment is also striking: *stirps*, means root and penis; *sectio* means to excise a diseased part, in particular, to castrate. The suggested castration of the sinner as remedy for the evil (figured as homosexual insemination of the male mind as anus) bears resemblance to the poem’s finale, in which castration is hinted at as punishment for sodomy.

Alain’s theological dictionary contains (*inter alia*) entries for the following freighted words: *vas, vomer, vomitus, vagina, vulva, semen, seminare, vis, virga, gladius, jactare, jacere,*

⁵⁸ The notion—no doubt already tired by Alain’s time—of the generative character of poetic genius (the fertile imagination) will be returned to.

⁵⁹ In his commentary on that passage, James Sheridan baldly claims that “Saturn is a planet displaying many contrary-to-nature aspects.” Ovid’s great poem may also be buried in the language of change here. In the *Metamorphoses* the arch-poet Orpheus is likewise dismembered (and *remembered* as the originator of homosexuality).

⁶⁰ “And if any [literally crooked, not straight] sordid seed dare to sprout in the garden of your mind, cut it off and destroy it at its root with a timely sickle.” (Translation my own.)

jacinthus, uterus, turtur, tumere, sterilis, stercus, saccus, renes, rapere, radix, quoniam, praeputium, pati, patere, parturire, nudus, nervus, mollire, molle, meretrix, mandragora, mamma, ludere, lignum, ligatus, lectus, gallus, fornicari, fodere, et cetera. Whenever these words don't have acknowledged sexual denotations, their sexual or prurient potential is close at hand. Of course, Alain does not always (or often) give these. The psychologically inclined might look upon these words as a key to Alain's preoccupations. One is compelled to ask, why *these* words?⁶¹ Why does a purported dictionary of biblical allusion require treatment of language so over-laden with lascivious meaning? Alain seems to have the schoolboy impulse to discover "dirty" words in the dictionary. (A fair number of his entries also deal with dirt and filth.) But he doesn't just find them, he *puts* them there! Alain's mind is in the gutter.⁶²

⁶¹ One regrets, to some extent, Alain's innovative organization of his glossary (among the first to alphabetize entries). How much more might we learn if we could observe his "free association." Still something may be gleaned from looking at the juxtaposition of ideas or frequent combinations of words within his text.

⁶² Alain's entry for *guttur*, is itself, noteworthy. Among other meanings for "throat," he gives us "sepulcher." (Perhaps, we can adapt Leo Bersani's provocative question to ask "Is the gullet a grave?" Alain also cites the song of Songs, where he tells us that that book has this to say about the lover: *Guttur illius suavissimum* (His throat is most smooth [or sweet]). Does this indicate an external characteristic, or is the inside of the beloved's throat smooth, or sweet? And what organ of the lover has entered the throat to discover this—tongue or tool? The canticle might usefully be excerpted at greater length to illuminate Alain's thinking:

His body is as ivory work overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold:
His aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.
His mouth is most sweet;
Yea, he is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved, and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

In fact, this very verse is the source for quite a few of Alain's dictionary entries, perhaps one explanation of the erotic element in the thesaurus. Alain obviously spent much time in contemplation of the beauties of this canticle. Of course, biblical exegetes and glossators were at great pains to make sense of this "pornographic" poem as religious allegory, and they even obscured much heterosexual content. Still, the homoerotic could never be completely submerged,

Alain's dictionary may not have had widespread circulation. (Who was its intended audience? Serious scholars or smut-minded schoolboys? Had Alain discovered one of the better ways to get a class's attention?)⁶³ One entry invites one to think that it may have reached at least one important reader. *Reliquiae* gets a relatively sustained treatment in the text, and the word, itself, appears frequently in the definitions of other entries. I would not be surprised if Jean de Meun was inspired by the tortured rhetoric of Alain in his treatment of a Nature who maintains that "reliques" might just as easily have been applied to *coillons*, that there is no necessary (or natural) correlation between signs and their referents. Does the reaction of de Meun's Lover to the "naughtiness" of Nature correspond to that of certain readers of the *Distinctiones*, appalled that such ambiguous language should find its way into religious rhetoric? If so, de Meun suggests that those able manipulators of language (Alain, Nature) know what they are doing.

especially since the poem was believed to have been composed by a man. Alain's dictionary and its attention to this poem should be explored at greater length. Perhaps, someone can be persuaded to compose a companion to Ziolkowski's work on *De Planctu* and produce *Alain de Lille's Glossary of Sex*.

⁶³ Surely it is a joke that Alain permits himself when he claims the word *puer* "*dicitur a pure*" where the etymon can be understood as *pure* (cleanly) or *pus* (pus), before clarifying it comes from *pus* (caretaker): "*id est a custodia, quia sub custodia est*" (that is from custodian, because he is under another's care). The reader wavers between recognizing the pure or purulent in *puer*, before Alain supplies the obscurer meaning of *pus*. *Pus as custodies* does not exist in classical Latin, and appears first in the second half of the seventh century. Many late authors were at pains to distinguish between the two meanings; most claimed that the putrid *pus* was indeclinable, while the careful *pus* was not. In the same entry Alain offers an alternative derivation and a suggestive biblical instance of the word: "*Dicitur purus vel iustus, et tunc dicitur a puritate; unde Dominus ait in Luca: Pueri mei mecum sunt in cubili*" (*Puer* means pure or just, and is said to come from "purity," whence the Lord says in the Gospel of Luke: My boys are in bed with me). The Lucan citation is from the same passage wherein we learn, "*[P]ulsate et aperietur vobis*" (Pound, and it will be opened to you)—a tantalizing promise for anyone primed by Damian to equate *ostia* with assholes. Far too many people ignore Alain's playful side. If nothing else, he has tongue in cheek. On the medieval uses of *pus*, see "À propos de *pus*: sens médiéval d'un mot antique" by Anne Grondeux and Colette Jeudy in *Bulletin du Cange* Vol. LIX, Bruxelles: Union Académique Internationale (2001) p. 139–160. The examples these authors give for this "*sens farfelu*" of *pus* show eight centuries (7th –15th) of wrestling with the word, originating with Virgilius Maro's citation of an untraceable text by Origen.

Much in the *Roman de la Rose* is an elaborate lampoon of the *De Planctu*. Was de Meun subverting a serious, sermonous tract, or was he only exaggerating an already ambiguous allegory?

Of course, Alain, himself, seems to be making similar claims about language and its malleability, or mutability. (And remember, mutability is a measure of a thing's corruption, it's denatured natured.)

The Melancholy of Anatomy

Some of these texts have already attracted attention among queer medievalists. Chaucer's Pardoner has become the *locus classicus* for examination of medieval gender trouble. Following Robert Miller, Carolyn Dinshaw, Robert Stuart Sturges, and Donald Howard, I make my small contribution to the study of Chaucer's effeminate enigma. I also hope to show how his unruly sexuality can also broaden our conception of *what* and *how* sex could mean in the Middle Ages. And also how the language of irregularity and fragmentation, in turn, are integral to understanding the Pardoner's social and sexual impulses.

Is sexuality *written in the body*? Recent research into the “gay brain” or a “gay gene” suggests that there may be a biological basis for homosexuality (and, by implication, other sexual preferences).⁶⁴ Modern scientists have made it their business to discover the source of these inclinations (sometimes ignoring the role of chance or circumstance—in a sense, privileging the natural over the social). These studies seek to prove that certain people are “born that way.” This

⁶⁴ See, for example, Simon LeVay's *Queer Science* (MIT Press, Cambridge 1996) and Edward Stein's critique, *The Mismeasure of Desire* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000). It seems to me that Stein missed an obvious opportunity to borrow from his philosophic forebear Nietzsche by not calling his book *The Gay Science*.

has relieved many from the burden of guilt and the shame of *moral* failure. (We *have no choice*.) Fourteenth-century science also believed that the body is destiny, and they sought biological causes for human behavior, or *essences*. Physiognomy, for instance, held that the character of a human being could be determined through examination of the face and figure—that personality existed in one’s *person*. Mostly, physical traits were seen as *signs* of native tendencies. Occasionally, they were also causes. Such, it has been suggested, is the case with Chaucer’s Pardoner.

I’ll look at the Pardoner’s anatomy as figured in the *Canterbury Tales* to examine how the poet uses *body* language to concretize concerns that preoccupy the character and to shed light on the poem as a whole. What is especially interesting is Chaucer’s handling of a semantic problem: his use of signs to indicate the *lack* of something. The pardoner becomes, as it were, a cipher.

What is *revealed* by these signs is *kept hidden* by another sign—the Pardoner’s purse. We are told “His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe, / Bretful of pardoun, comen from rome al hoot.” (GP 686–87) In place of his tool, then, are the instruments of his trade. He tells us himself that, in preparation to preaching,

First I pronounce wheenes that I come,
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
Oure lige lordes seal on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente (PP 335–38)

The last word—glossed as “to protect” in *The Riverside Chaucer*—shows that the Pardoner is wary of danger to his body, but it suggests the *validation* of that body, as well. That the Pardoner “shows his bulls” has an alarming sound. There is altogether too much of the exhibitionist in the Pardoner already! (Besides the similarity in sound between “bulls” and “balls,” there is, of course, the dangerously masculine animal of that name.) If these indulgences are, in fact, fetched from Rome, we can gauge the extent of the Pardoner’s compensation for what he lacks.

In addition to his *bulls*, the Pardoner also carries false relics in his bag, which is twice (GP 694 and PT 920) referred to as his “male.”⁶⁵ Among them, “my longe cristal stones.” (PP 347) The Pardoner manages to keep quite a store of goods in his bag. (Or his fecund bag-cum-scrotal sack is constantly replenished.) In addition to the items already mentioned, there are a cross, veils, mittens, pieces of cloth, and the bones of pigs and sheep. (And these in sufficient quantity to supply a sinful parish.) In this, one might see masculinity, itself, as a false relic or talisman, which is to become fetishized. The part stands for the whole; the symbol, for the absent thing.⁶⁶ The Pardoner sports quite a *package*. (In later centuries, the codpiece would perform the similar function of advertising—and aggrandizing—what it ostensibly, and ostentatiously, concealed.) Of course, covers often draw attention to what they veil. Chaucer has the Pardoner attempt to hide one thing by displaying another.

In approaching the Pardoner in this fragmentary way—by riving his body—I may be guilty of a sort of blasphemy against Chaucer. Insofar as both text and reader are concerned with the expression of this sin of the tongue, my prying encounter with the verbally perverse Pardoner expands my project beyond flirting with dubious language practices—words, figures, traditions—to dancing with the doubtful practitioner, himself. While I eschew equating the words of my texts with their authors and their intentions, this character gives me scope to examine how authors (or speakers) mean their words to mean.

If my approach to these texts is appealing or revealing, the exercise has the potential to expand the field of texts which are deemed possible candidates for queer scholarship. And to

⁶⁵ This is a type of bag or pouch, often hung from the waist before the lap. Chaucer exploits the homonym and the visual symbolism.

⁶⁶ The prophylactic nature of the objects must be questioned, as well, since they have not protected the Pardoner, himself.

prompt reassessment of and tolerance for medieval repression and representation of homosexuality.

A Monstration

“The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.”

Jacques Derrida

I do violence to the texts, yet they remain inviolate. They reveal mystery yet retain mystique. A miraculous transformation, like the Virgin’s hymen. The text yields to queer touches, yet remains intact. Or, interpretation is a type of translation or transmutation. The text remains the same on its surface but its meaning is altered—transmogrified by context or the viewpoint of the reader. The *verbum* is unchanged, the *res* or *sensus* is altered. It performs a transubstantiation, inducing another spirit into the body of the word. My project is one of such transmutation—but as in a Black Mass. It is a reverse transfiguration or transmogrification: making something sublime base, and exploring the perverse pleasure this provides.

My method combines the impulses of the *eromenos* (ἐρώμενος, boy-lover) and the *hermeneus* (ἐρμηνεύς, interpreter). In this eromeneutics, then, the reader solicits the text to surrender to his uses. In a queer reading of these texts, the *liber* is *quod libet* and *quodlibet*, both what pleases you and what-you-please. I imagine these medieval texts as partners which resist penetration, then yield, then push back to produce a pleasurable hermeneutic friction. Occasionally, this will result in an ecstatic *aperçu* or an insightful *jouissance*. Every reading session is an encounter between the *liber* and the libertine, sometimes deliberate,¹ and always liberating.

¹ Latin *delibero* is to weigh in one’s mind, to consider. I would like to introduce *delibro* into the practice: that is the peeling back of bark, as if removing a textual husk to reveal the cob within, the semantic kernels. Insofar as *delibro* ≈ *deglubo* (to jerk off), I also want to engage the idea that this entails generating a pleasant friction between textual membrane and meaning.

The analyst's *accessus* announces an interpretive method of approaching the text, as the clew that should be followed through the labyrinth toward understanding. The *accessus* indicates how to read a text. For my purposes and method, the word is particularly apt. As I show in my chapter on Damian, *accedo* and its derivatives have a sexual potential: to approach someone for sex, to solicit sex. Martial's VII.18 uses "accedo ad opus" to convey the idea of "getting to work" on the promiscuous Galla.² We may also imagine the text as acceding, in turn—that is, consenting to our come-on. The phallic, penetrative aspect of textual *accessus*, might also suggest itself to the medieval mind because *accedo* is so close to *axedo*, which *DuCange* defines (rather, translates) as ἐμβολόν, that is, piston. It is, he says, *Lignum quod axi immittitur* (The piece of wood that is inserted into the axle).³ Finally, an *accessor* is, according to *DuCange*, a *ludi socius*, a playmate. I tumble these texts as such an accessory.

When Vergil wrote (*Aeneid* 3.658), "Monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum." he described the cyclops Polyphemus as a "hair-raising monster, enormous and ill-formed, deprived of sight." When Ausonius adopted the line (at *Cento Nuptialis* 108) he applied it to a different marvel: a bridegroom's rigid penis, "a one-eyed pulsing prodigy, gigantic and misshapen." Likewise, Vergil's "It cruor, inque humerus cervix collapsa recumbit" describes the

² This epigram is a noteworthy example of Martial's misogyny; he lambastes his sexual partner for the "garrulitas" of her "fatuus," "clamosus" cunt. ("Fatuus" is foolish, but it also engages the idea of idle speech, as its root is *fa-*. cf. *ineffabilis*, *affabilis*, *diffamatio*, *confabulor*.) The "speaking" cunt is contrasted with Galla's own silence. The notion of vagina as mouth is implicit in his calling the offending noises *poppysmata*, a word used elsewhere for the clicking of tongues or the smacking of lips. The *labia*, of course, are lips, and the *clitoris* may be likened to the tongue. Presumably, it will be these organs that Galla trains if she takes his advice that she "disce vel inde loqui" (Teach, at least, your cunt to talk).

³ The exact meaning of the word is unclear; *axis* is the usual word for the *pole*, not the nave or axle-box of the wheel. TTL says "Videtur esse idem quod axis, vel asserculus" (It seems to be the same as axis, or a small pole).

death of Euryalus: His blood flows across [his beautiful limbs], and his drooping neck sinks onto his shoulder. The same text deployed as metaphorical vehicle by Luxorius has an altogether different tenor. In his centonic *Epithalamium Fridi* the phrase refers to nuptial coitus, where the hitherto virgin bride's blood flows, and her neck falls exhausted on her husband's shoulder (or his collapses onto hers).⁴ This is how most translators construe the tag, and they are correct as far as they go, but I think they miss a degree of the intended play by not pursuing the sexual sense further. It is not enough that the bride's languor be likened to death in battle; that is commonplace. Perhaps, the recumbent action here is not hers, but his. A hard-plied prick may also be seen to droop. Such a reading is made more likely if we engage with the Vergilian original. The description appears in the passage describing Nisus and Euryalus—already bywords for homosexuality—in battle. There, the slain Euryalus is said to languish like a flower cut down by the plough or as a poppy hangs its head made heavy with rain:

volvitur Euryalus leto, pulchrosque per artus
it crux, inque umeros cervix conlapsa recumbit:
purpureus veluti cum flos succisus aratro
languescit moriens lassove papavera collo
demisere caput, pluvia cum forte gravantur.
(Aeneid 9. 433–437)

Euralus turns over in death,
And blood spurts over his beautiful limbs;
His limp neck rests on his shoulders.
Just as a crimson bud cut down by the plow languishes as it dies,
And the poppy with lazy neck lays down its head
When heavy with a sudden shower.⁵

⁴ The Carthaginian Luxorius wrote his cento on the cusp of the sixth century, about a hundred years after the Gallic Ausonius, four hundred years after Geta's centonic tragedy *Medea*. If nothing else, we can confirm the extent and longevity of the ludic reinterpretation of classical Latin texts.

⁵ Vergil's image is, itself, a melange of Catullan and Homeric similes. The *Iliad* (8.349–353) describes Diomedes' deadly onslaught (in Richard Fagles' translation):

Petronius' *Satyricon* contains a short Vergilian cento that applies the lines to an impotent penis (rather than one which is spent). Encolpius describes his recalcitrant cock: “*Haec ut iratus effudi, Illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat, nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur quam lentae salices lassove papavera collo*” (Thus piqued, I let pour, while it held fixed its averted eyes, his head no more moved by my words than limp willow or drooping poppy). The willow image is drawn from *Eclogue 5*, in a homosexual context, where Menalcas compares Amyntas unfavorably with Mopsus (pliant willow vs. pallid olive trees). The reader familiar with both poets will glean greater pleasure from the daisy-chain of allusion. The cento, too, is a type of translation. The words of another author are appropriated and repurposed, given a different use. It is the dismemberment of a prior text, whose limbs one uses to assemble another creation. Is it new? Is it yours? I maintain that in our manipulation or manhandling of language we make it new; we make it ours. In his work on the genre, *Virgil Recomposed: The Mythological and*

As a garden poppy, burst into red blooms, bends,
drooping its head to one side, weighed down
by its full seeds and a sudden spring shower,
so Gorgythion's head fell limp over one shoulder,
weighed down by his helmet.

While Catullus (*Elegies 11.24–27*) lashes out at an unfaithful enamorata:

nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam
tactus aratro est.

Let her not look for my love as before,
Which sinks through her sin, like a
Flower at the meadow's edge, after it is
Touched by the passing plow.

Luxorius' verse is made more salacious if the reader recalls these texts, too. Homer's bursting, blooming blossom is a ready-made image of the cock, reinforced by that shower and those seeds. Catullus' wilting “*amor*” is a metonym for the *mentula*, grown slack in disappointment.

Secular Centos in Antiquity, Scott McGill notes, how the cento necessarily engages its reader in play: “[A] cento should not be met with such naive reading, and instead calls upon its audience to exercise its critical faculty in scrutinizing how the author negotiates the rules of his game and produces a text.” McGill also suggests that Ausonius, at least, conceived of the Vergilian fragments as *membra* which derives from (in the words of A.M. Keith) “a conventional literary vocabulary that metaphorically figures texts and parts of texts as their authors’ bodies and limbs.”⁶ This playing with and joining of limbs may remind some of Frankenstein, to me it connotes sexual conjugation.

Ausonius elsewhere laments, “[P]iget equidem Vergiliani carminis dignitatem tam ioculari de honestasse materia” (On my part, it pains me to have the dignity of Vergil’s poetry dishonored by such foolish subject matter), yet he concludes his *Cento Nuptialis*, “Contentus esto, Paule mi/lasciva, o Paule, pagina/ ridere, nil ultra expeto” (Be happy, my Paulus. Lascivious, o Paulus, the page. I desire nothing more than your smiling laughter). Ausonius may confuse the reader about whom he wishes to please—the poet and rhetor Axius Paulus or his already excited member. *Paule mi* (vocative of *Paulus*) might be read as an address to his “*palus*,” his shaft or pale.⁷ If *ridere* = *jouir*, to experience sexual delight (as it can in Italian), the expected laughter

⁶ “Slender Verse: Roman Elegy and Ancient Rhetorical Theory,” p. 41.

⁷ *Palus* is a frequent metaphor for prick. The reader’s visual abbreviation of “au” to “a” may have been abetted by an aural similarity. The historical evolution of the Latin language records that the diphthong “au” commonly became “o” or “u.” Reading “*polus*” for Paulus does not discourage the identification; *polus*, too, is a cylindrical post: a pole. Axius Paulus may have been accustomed to puns on his name, beginning with his parents; a *polus* is also an axis. If the shift of “au” is toward “u,” Ausonius addresses his dear *pullus*, beloved, or catamite. Festus (in his entry for *pullus*, 245.13–7:) says, “*Puer, qui obscoene ab aliquo amabatur, ejus, a quo amatus esset, pullus vocabatur*” (A boy loved obscenely or otherwise, was called chick by his lover). Festus illustrates with an amusing anecdote: “*Pullus Iovis dicebatur Q. Fabius, cui Eburno cognomen erat propter candorem, quod eius natis fulmine icta erat*” (Quintus Fabius, whose nickname was “Ivory” on account of his pallor, was called Jupiter’s boytoy, because his ass had been struck by lightning). Arnobius (*Against the Heathens* IV.27) makes the same

may be understood as ejaculation, produced by tickling his funny bone. There is also a double ambiguity in “*contentus*.” It may mean satisfied, or stretched and strained. Ausonius’ *Paulus/palus* may be both, *seriatim*: first, reading the bawdy *Cento*, and having exhausted itself. The word *contentus* also contains a paradox; it is the state produced by restraint, especially from sexual desire: continence.⁸ I wonder, too, whether Ausonius recognized a type of portmanteau in the word, *contentus* as a possible conflation of *contus tentus*, or “rigid prick.”⁹

Sodomy, The Sex That Is Not One

A Latin epigrammatic dialogue by Ausonius proposes a riddle that depends on familiarity with the configurations of group sex:

“Tris uno in lecto: stuprum duo perpetiuntur,
et duo committunt.” “Quattuor esse reor.”

“Falleris: extremis da singula crimina et ilium
bis numera medium, qui facit et patitur.”

“Three in one bed. Two undergo vile crime,
Two undertake it.” “I reckon that’s four.”

“You speak falsely: figure the one on either end commits a single sin,
But the one in the middle is double: he does and is done to.”¹⁰

The riddle confounds numerical and nominal expectations. The middle man is a

identification of Fabius with the *pullus*-catamite: “*Catamitus rapitur deliciarum futurus et poculorum custos, et ut Iovis dicatur pullus, in partibus Fabius aduritur mollibus obsignatur que posticis*” (Ganymede is abducted, to be a plaything and cupbearer; and so he may be called Jove’s boychik, Fabius, is scorched on his faggy buttocks, stamped on his posterior).

⁸ The integrity of the body is maintained by “holding it in.” The release of both laughter and semen violates the corporal container.

⁹ The *Priapeia* (10) refers to a *contus pedalis*, a footlong pole, as a characteristic of its titulary tutelary god.

¹⁰ Ausonius, Epigram 43 Green (39); Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 92.

mystery. His versatility defies definition, and the response of the second speaker indicates that he is unthinkable. (Such *mathema* is anathema.) He is single, yet double. He is singular in his duality. He is active and passive. Man and woman. Top and bottom. Indeed, his designation as “*ilium... medium*” (that one in the middle) figures him not only as intermediary, but also indeterminate, a member of a middle sex. We confront the ever un-nerving aspect of the versatile queer.¹¹

Ausonius declares this reprobate a *medium*, a middle term wherewith he names both the buttocks and the cock. Adams (116) notes, “*Medius*, finally, could be used of any taboo part,” and offers a use of the word to signify the asshole from *Priapeia* 54.2: “*qui medium vult te scindere, pictus erit*” (It will be an image of what wants to split your middle). *Medium* in Ovid’s *Amores* 2.10.36—"Cum moriar, medium solvar et inter opus" (When I die, may I let loose (or go soft) in the middle of the job)—is not merely temporal but topological; it hints at the organ in the middle of the author’s body. Not satisfied with a single paraphrase for “penis,” Ovid supplies *opus*, which tells us not only that he flags in the act, but that he fails in the instrument. (Adams, page 57, allows that *opus*, like *venus*, names the sexual performance and its props.)¹² Some editors correct Ausonius’ text to read “*et illum bis numera medium*” (and that one in the middle

¹¹ Neither pitcher nor catcher, even today the utility (or two-way) player is eyed with suspicion—like that which accompanies the bisexual switch-hitter—and caution—he embodies a new notion of danger, as prime vector for disease.

¹² This equation of *opus* with penis also occurs in the playful prodding of his amorous muse at *Amores* 3.1.70: “*a tergo grandius urget opus*” (A greater work hastens at my back/A bigger prick is pressing on my backside). The same association compounds Ovid’s boast in the culminating line of the *Amores* (3.15.20): “*Post mea mansurum fata superstes opus* (After I’m gone, this will perdure, my everlasting poem/penis).

[commits] a double [crime]).¹³ But what if we permit *ilium* to stand? Then it, like the man in the middle, reveals a double nature. *Ilium* is pelvis, groin, the cock and balls;¹⁴ *ileum* is the small intestine near the rump. The slippery *ili[e]um* is the crotch which “gets it done” and the rectum that “it gets done to.” “*Ilium [. . .] medium qui facit et patitur,*” then, is a phrase that works double-time. Outside the sexual gymnastics of the riddle, it calls forth a sexual ouroboros, a monstrous entity—a divinity?—that is simultaneously the penetrating cock and the engulfing asshole, a wheeling symbol of (n)ever-ending *nefas*, perversion in perpetuity.¹⁵

The erotic riddle’s audience takes a stand in venturing a solution; a knowing answer implicates him as member of the class of readers who possess or produce such knowledge. In explaining the riddle, Ausonius—unlike most puzzle-posers—does not excuse/exclude himself from the in-group; he acknowledges familiarity with orgiastic gymnastics. In fact, he exults in the superiority this knowledge confers. “*Falleris,*” he pronounces: “You’re wrong” or “You disappoint.” He may hint at the possible perversity of his interlocutor: *Fallo* is to deceive or to

¹³ It is just possible that *bis numera* can be construed as “double duty;” *numerus* is an “office, duty, part,” the last idea perhaps comparable to our sense of the word in phrases like “He performed a comic number” or “For my next number, I’ll pull a rabbit out of my ass.”

¹⁴ Isidore writes, “The private parts (*ilium*, i.e. *ilia*) are referred to with a Greek word, because there we cover ourselves up, for in Greek *ilios* (i.e. *εἰλύειν*) means “cover up.””

¹⁵ This sense of circular sin—at once closed and infinite—is, I think, hinted at in the epigrammatist’s *perpetior*, whose thorough-going submission (*per + patior*) also suggests perpetration (*perpetro*), completion (also *perpetro*, as it were *per + patro*, to conclude) and perpetuation (*perpetuo*) of crime. Perhaps not coincidentally, the adjoining and parallel verb *committo* can mean “to begin.” If we allow an association with *comito* (to follow) and *comitor* (to join, and in GELL *concubare*) the phrase “*duo committunt*” suggests the commission of an act that “joins two from behind” which is true of the action at one end. If an association is made with *comedo*—as in the biblical adulteress “*quae comedit et tergens os suum dicit non sum operata malum*” (Who eats it and wiping her mouth says, I have done nothing wrong)—the phrase suggests an oral comity, which is true of the action at the other end.

speak falsely; *falsus*, its past participle, is deceptive, untrue.¹⁶ This accusation of misspeaking suggests the respondent is guilty of sins of the tongue. Another type of misspeaking might render *falleris* “*felleris*,” that is, “you will fellate.” (Perhaps, as the forfeit that guessing incorrectly entails?) Such a suggestion casts the respondent as cocksucker, a mirror of the riddle’s middle-man. To engage with a text is to situate oneself in relation to it; to imbue it with one’s own experience, knowledge, and personality; and to allow it, in turn, to exert influence on the reader. Ausonius recognizes—or insists—that interpretation entails interpolation and interpellation.

The word, too, is a *medium*. It is a means of conveying meaning.¹⁷ It stands—or runs—between author and reader, speaker and audience, lover and beloved. And insofar as it fails to do this faithfully it is a *verbum medium*, indefinite, ambiguous, and sometimes even contrary to accepted meaning.¹⁸ Aulus Gellius (12.9.1) advises,

Est plurifariam videre atque animadvertere in veteribus scriptis pleraque vocabula, quae nunc in sermonibus vulgi unam certamque rem demonstrent, ita fuisse media et communia ut significare et capere possent duas inter se res contrarias.

¹⁶ *Fallo* is also “to cause to go unnoticed” or “to silence something disagreeable.” Ausonius may infer that the answer “Four” is disingenuous, an attempt to escape notice or remain undiscovered.

¹⁷ Isidore (VIII.xi.45–47) offers a fanciful etymology for the name of the god Mercury which gives clues to the medieval notion of the “middle-ing” character of language:

Mercury (*Mercurius*) is translated as “speech,” for Mercury is said to be named as if the word were *medius currens* (“go-between”), because speech is the go-between for people. In Greek he is called Ἐρμῆς, because ‘speech’ or ‘interpretation,’ which pertains especially to speech, is called ἐρμηνεία. He is also said to preside over commerce (*merx, mercis*), because the medium between dealers and buyers is speech. So he is imagined to have wings, because words run to and fro quickly. Whence also he is represented as rapid and roving; the wings on his head and feet signify speech taking flight through the air. He is called the messenger, because all thoughts are expressed by speech. They also say he is the master of trickery, because speech deceives the minds of those who listen.

¹⁸ An issue left in *medio* was “in doubt” or unresolved.

Everywhere one can see and take note in older texts that many words which in ordinary conversation today signify a single and certain meaning, were then so ambiguous and dubious, that they could signify and acquire two opposite things.

Gellius' censure of such two-timing language may be indicated by his use of *communis* in relation to them. Like *medium*, it refers to what is public, but it also conveys the suspect sense still retained in English "common." Not only commonplace, but disreputable, *demimondaine*, pertaining to prostitutes. And not merely meretricious, but gay-for-pay: in grammar, *communia verba* are those with active and passive significations, depending on how you employ them.¹⁹ Finally, Gellius' ambiguous words may be gender-confused. *Medium* is "neutral" and *communis* is "both masculine and feminine." The reader must recognize words' ability to deceive and delight; must acknowledge that texts, like men, are multiple or variable in their uses, plural and plastic in their pleasures.

Two senses can exist simultaneously in a single word. The *verbum* is *biformis*. Is this true of the Logos? The word *biformis* connotes monstrosity: the Minotaur, centaurs, Scylla, and Pan (humanimal hybrids); or Cecrops and Hermaphroditus (double-sexed demigods). *Biformis* also designates the miraculous: the Incarnation of the god-man. In *De incarnationis dominicae sacramento* 35, Ambrose considers the Logos and calls it *biformis*: "*Eo quod biformis geminaeque naturae unus sit consors divinitatis et corporis, 'qui tanquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo exsultavit tanquam gigans ad currēdam viam*" (There exists a union [or sharing] of divinity and body of a nature double in form and twin, "who like a bridegroom coming from his bedchamber exulted as a giant to run a race). The Incarnation's nature is "*biformis geminaeque*," (two-formed and twin), a double term which asserts duality. It is also singular

¹⁹ For what it's worth, the "parts" of a word could also be described as "common;" *communis syllaba* are sometimes long and sometimes short.

(*unus sit*) and partial (*consors*, sharing, partaking). *Consors* is a two-timing term: as “brother” it looks back to *geminæ*, as “wife” it anticipates *sponsus*. (The union of bride and groom is another iteration of the Incarnation, the joining of body to soul.) In the middle ages *consors* might be written for *concors*, that is, *unanimis*, of one mind. *Gigans* might escape notice as reinforcing the Logos’ doubleness. Ambrose uses the idea again in the hymn “*Veni, redemptor gentium*,” where Christ is referred to as “*geminæ gigas substantiae*,” a giant of twofold substance. The idea is developed from Genesis 6:4, where the “sons of God” are said to “come to the daughters of men,” who conceive a race of giants, the *nephelim*, who therefore have a double nature: half human, half angelic.

We must celebrate the two-fold nature, the monstrosity, of language: the word as lexeme and sememe; phoneme and phenomenon. When Paul says “there is neither male nor female” in Jesus Christ, most imagine a perfected state as without gender, anatomically neuter, sexless. Instead of accepting this celestial equation of man- and womankind through negation, we should instead embrace a multiplying model, where the alternative to “neither” is not “none” but “both” or “all.” We anticipate the pleasures promised to such creatures, when we enjoy the duality, neutrality, ambiguity, multiplicity, polysemy, or pleniloquence of the word.²⁰

In exposing the un- (or under-)written in texts, a queer reader transmutes the unspoken and unspeakable. The tacit or implicit is made explicit; the illicit, licit. For example, in Romans (1:26–27) Paul tacitly attests to something rarely acknowledged by contemporary or later readers: same-sex desire is not a unidirectional expression of power or status (master-slave;

²⁰ Paul (Galatians 3:28) promises, “All of you will be one;” our motto must be “Every one will be many.”

erastes-eromenos; top-bottom), but mutual; queer desire and pleasure are felt by both partners.²¹

The Vulgate runs, “*exarserunt in desideriis suis in invicem masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes*” (“[Men] burned in their desires reciprocally for each other; men producing disorder in other men”).²² Admittedly, my language of desire and disorder softens what is certainly a denunciation of irregular passions, but the reading is possible. The usual English translations merely suggests inclination, that desire is *toward* another, accomplished *with* someone else. *Invicem* declares that the men take turns, that their ardor is shared, returned, in turn. *Invicem* means mutual, reciprocal, requited. What is being described is not an aggressive imposition on another man, but men who love *one another*, together.²³ *Invicem* (from *in* + *vicis*, turn, change) also picks up on the sense of transformation—the men turned from natural uses—in the

²¹ The pleasure of the “passive” participant is not only ignored but often denied. Even in those writing about pre-Christian classical literature. It is as if we imagined that all the writers on the adult pleasures of boy-love had forgotten the delight they had experienced as the younger partner. As counter evidence one need only look to the *Mousa Paidike*, for example *Greek Anthology* 12.210, Strato’s earlier version of Ausonius’ mathematical riddle, where the mutual gratification is not denied nor elided:

Τρεῖς ἀρίθμει τοὺς πάντας ὑπὲρ λέχος, ὃν δύο δρῶσιν,
καὶ δύο πάσχουσιν. Θαῦμα δοκῶ τι λέγειν.
καὶ μὴν οὐ ψεῦδος: δυσὶν εἷς μέσσος γὰρ ὑπουργεῖ
τέρπων ἐξόπιθεν, πρόσθε δὲ τερπόμενος.

Count three for all those on the bed, of whom two are active
And two are passive. Do you think I’m speaking of a miracle?
But it’s really no lie. The middle one is involved with the other two,
Giving pleasure behind, getting pleasure in front.

From *Greek Anthology* 12.210. Greek text from Paton (1920) vol. 4, p. 388, trans. Nigel M. Kay (2001) p. 165.

²² The sense of *turpitudo* as shamefulness, disgrace is based on its primary meaning of deformity, unsightliness, which I opt for here.

²³ *Invicem* may also imply succession, in which case certain readers might entertain the notion of cause and effect or contagion, homosexuality as a rondelay of exposures and infections.

preceding clause and the deformity suggested later by *turpitudo*. *Vicem*, by itself, suggests recompense, remuneration and retaliation, which is followed up on in the close of the passage: *mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui in semet ipsis recipientes* (Each in himself receiving the fitting reward due their waywardness). It might also suggest the exchange of bodily fluids as the consequence of their trade: they are, after all, filled “*repletos omni iniquitate*” (filled with every sort of sin). Can *exarserunt* be seen as a portmanteau word, combining *exaro*—to plough—and *sero*—to plant seeds? Is insemination suggested by *in semet*; does one hear *roris*, “of semen,” in *erroris*? It is possible to read *invicem* as “by turns,” “alternately.” In which case, these sinners are imagined to swap places (a *vicis* is also a position or office), inferring that they are not fixed in their roles, but sexually versatile. The peculiarities of language allow the Latin reader to suspect a subtle stress on the idea of insertion, with the repetition of the preposition *in*. (The phoneme *in* inheres in the words *turpitudinem* and *invicem*, so the sound-seed is planted five times. It is a question whether the Latin reader deduced what shape this desire took from the embedded repetition of *cul-* in *masculi in masculos*.²⁴ By Paul’s lights, then, perhaps we should regard the *peccatum mutum* as the *peccatum mutuum*. The sin is not muted but mutual; not shushed but shared.

Conquering Vice

The queer reader is nothing new. Writing about perverse tendencies in interpretation, Quintilian laments, “[*M*]ala consuetudine in obscenum intellectum sermo detortus est” (Through evil

²⁴ The antique systems were a means whereby a license was granted to a citizen, so no social opprobrium attached to his *active* participation in sodomy. Christian ethics spread the blame, so both partners were seen as guilty. One wonders, again, if Christian disgust was accentuated by the *cul* in *culpa*.

custom speech is twisted [or distorted] into an obscene connotation), absolving venerable authors, and condemning modern readers: *[Q]uam culpam non scribentium quidem iudico sed legentium, tamen vitandam, quatenus verba honesta moribus perdidimus et vincentibus etiam vitiis cedendum est*” (The fault, I observe, is not in the writers but the readers. Still, they are to be avoided, insofar as we’ve lost decent words through common usage, and must yield the field to conquering vice). Here, Quintilian acknowledges the descent of language into indecency; meaning does not remain pure, however ancient, but is perverted by those inclined that way. Described as *detortus*, language is figured as a body that can be violated, or tortured, or bent. (Whether bent over, as a body prepped for anal sex, or simply bent in the British sense of “queer,” I leave to the reader’s own bent.) That the violence done to language is sexual is implied by the word *honesta*: chastity and bodily integrity are abused by evil habit. (*Consuetudo*, custom, is like enough to *consuetio*, carnal intercourse, to prompt the reader to intuit that this misuse is a malign type of sexual behavior.) What is common or customary is communicated by the words *consuetudo*, *modus*, and *mos*, which all have sexual connotations.²⁵ These seem to equivocate on the “natural” aspect of language, on its inherent semantic stability. A word’s “original” sense is likened to virginity, a worthy, intact state; through contact with men, it acquires wicked connotations and subsequent abuses. But is virginity the only natural state? Is motherhood less natural for having come about through traffic with men? In fact, virginity (after a certain age, or in a single-sex community) can be seen as unnatural; by analogy, then, the monosemantic *verbum* is a case of wasted opportunity and arrested development. The word is

²⁵ J.N. Adams notes that in Plautus, *consuesco* is “used vaguely of what a certain type is accustomed to do and alluding particularly to a homosexual act.” In *An Anthology of Informal Latin, 200 BC–AD 900: Fifty Texts with Translations and Linguistic Commentary*, Cambridge University Press (2016).

not a pristine relic to be admired, but a spinster relict to be wondered at. This notion of language as a parallel to female modes of being is influenced, perhaps, by the word *consuetudo*, which came to mean “menstruation.” The choice between misuse and disuse of language is the choice between the fecund and the moribund.

Quintilian follows this with an example of the wilful distortion, the queering of classical poetry:

Nec scripto modo id accidit,” he advises, “sed etiam sensu plerique obscene intelligere, nisi caveris, cupiunt (ut apud Ovidium “quaeque latent meliora putant”) et ex verbis quae longissime ab obscenitate absunt occasionem turpitudinis rapere. Siquidem Celsus cacemphaton apud Vergilium putat: “incipiunt agitata tumescere.” Quod si recipias, nihil loqui tutum est. (8.3.47)

And this happens not only in written texts, for, unless you take care, many readers are keen to understand things in an obscene sense—as Ovid says “Whatever is hidden, they think better”—and to wrestle from words which are the furthest from obscenity an opportunity for offensiveness. Thus Celsus finds *double entendre* in Vergil’s “Aroused, they start to swell.”²⁶ But if we allow this to be the case, it is not safe to say anything.

Quintilian’s Ovidian tag is more than apt here. It is taken from the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, when Apollo gazes on the naiad Daphne’s beautiful body. Ovid itemizes her charms: hair, eyes, lips, shoulders, wrists, hands, and fingers. What Phoebus cannot see, he imagines is more lovely, still: “*si qua latent, meliora putat.*” Euphemism barely obscures the object of his intent: the pudenda. So, in arguing that sex is not latent in these texts, Quintilian cites an authority who says that sex is *precisely* what is hidden. It remains unclear whether the desideratum is beautiful because it is covered, or covered because it is beautiful. That it is Phoebus Apollo who is denied sight, reminds us that sex takes place at night, in the dark, and the sex organs are putatively “where the sun don’t shine.” The grammarian exploits the Ovidian

²⁶ The phrase is found at *Georgics* 1.357, where the poet describes the effects of wind on waves.

context (the rape of Daphne) to figure such reading practices as an assault on the text. The words *cedo*, *rapio*, *recipio*, *tutus*, and *vicens* also figure this as an attack or military infringement. The fantasy of language as an impregnable wall responds to its vulnerability to undermining (and over-meaning). *Cedo* and *recipio* (to withdraw and to retreat) allow us to picture this capitulation as a receptive surrender to verbal necessity. This conflation of conquest and custom and necessity and passivity recalls Thucydides' dictum, "Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Expansive reading habits present a real danger to language, as if to admit multiple meanings were to admit a Trojan horse into the well-policed precincts of language.

It is not language, alone, is threatened by these intrusions. The author, insofar as he cannot control or limit meaning, is shown to be no authority, at all. Likewise, the speaker is figured as being buggered or irrumated by an over-bold auditor, if he is receptive to such practices. "*Quod si recipias*," he warns, "*nihil loqui tutum est*:" If you allow this, nothing is safe to say. Quintilian emphasizes spoken language here, so if we hear "*nihil loci tutum est*," no place is safe, he acknowledges that the location of speech—the mouth—is menaced. Prompted by the promise of danger in misspeaking (or mishearing) words, the perverse reader looks in vain for an example of cacemphaton in this Quintilian passage. I hoped to find an example of the detested practice in the very place where it is denounced. In vain, of course, unless we hear "*tu tumesce*" within "*tutum est*," then Quintilian surreptitiously exhorts his pupil "Get hard!" This might not be a stretch, considering the Vergilian quote ("*incipiunt agitata tumescere*") has already introduced the word to our receptive, passive, capacious intelligence (no place is safe!). It may well be that this is a Quintilian mind-fuck: "To me, sense is tumescence." The grammarian knows all intellection is interlection.

I wonder if Quintilian was recalling Ovid's advice (from *Remedia Amoris* 144) on how to make oneself safe: “*Cedit amor rebus, res age, tutus eris*” (Love succumbs to action. Get to it, and you will be safe). Believing that leisure leads to lust, the elegist prescribes keeping busy, occupying both mind and hands. But the line is ambiguous. *Res agere* is to “do the deed” or “do the marital office.” If *res* is not the euphemistic “business” here, it may be a circumlocution for the penis and vagina, “those things.” “*Res age*,” then, is an exhortation to put the prick in motion, to rouse or agitate it. To avoid the power of the beloved Ovid recommends nipping desire in the bud. If so, idle hands are not the devil's playthings, active hands are. The lover is safe, but not untouched.

To those who protest that my reading, my method, is impossible within a medieval context and therefore an injury to the authors, I respond that my effort is eminently medieval. Just as the post-classical exegetes elaborated a novel mode of interpretation—allegory—to explain/understand/accommodate prior texts to new cultural/ethical/sexual *habitus*, so I employ a method neither anathema nor antithetical to my texts.

Against Interpretation

Writing on Homer, Heraclitus declared, “It is a weighty and damaging charge that heaven brings against Homer for his disrespect for the divine. If he meant nothing allegorically, he was impious through and through.”²⁷ This was at the beginning of a wave of allegorizations of the poet

²⁷ “Μέγας ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ καὶ χαλεπὸς ἀγὼν Ὁμήρῳ καταγγέλλεται περὶ τῆς εἰς τὸ θεῖον ὀλιγωρίας. Πάντα γὰρ ἡσέβησεν, εἰ μηδὲν ἡλληγόρησεν.” *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems*, edited and translated by Donald A. Russell and David Konstan, Society of Biblical Literature: Writings from the Greco-Roman World, Vol. 14, (Atlanta) 2005, p. 3. The translation is Russell's. Heraclitus seems to have found aischrony rampant. According to Clement of Alexandria, Heraclitus plained, “If it were not Dionysus for whom they march in procession and chant the hymn to the genitals, their action would be most shameless,” where the word translated as “genitals” could find cover in “the reverend one.”

intending to exonerate him from charges of blasphemy. In an incitement to read creatively, Heraclitus writes so—punning on ὀλιγωρία and ἀλληγορία, the Greek words for disrespect and allegory. Of Homer, Heraclitus also insists, “He had a licentious tongue, a shameful disease.”²⁸ The unchecked tongue is noxious; it demands correction, perhaps in the form of extirpation. κολάζω is to check or chastise; also to prune drastically. The unrelated, but near-rhyme, κόλαψ means root or stem.²⁹ The unruly member is diseased, and the remedy is the surgical removal of the offensive tongue/root/cock. If the sexually promiscuous tongue cannot be sliced off, it may be silenced or muffled; its analog can be confined to a cockcage—by the application of allegory. For some exegetes the technique is not seen as giving license to interpretation, but as a means to regulate or control what can be said or thought about a text. One effective way to bridle speech is to jam something down the throat; garrulity is impossible when the throat or mouth is stoppered. The classical imagination saw occasion for sexual metaphor here, too. Adams (127) examines the tradition: “It was a standard joke to speak of *irrumatio* as a means of silencing someone.” Irrumation as punishment for trespass is, of course, the go-to response of the garden-god Priapus. For the Latin speaker the association of language and punishment and the private parts is almost inevitable, for the scoundrel (*verbero*) deserves to be flogged (*verbero*), which entails *verba* (words) and *verber* (a lash or rod, and by extension the tumescent penis).³⁰ Heraclitan allegorization, then, might seem to be an aggressive response to sexual language; it not only puts words into the author’s mouth, it inserts the critic’s cock.

²⁸ “Ἄκολαστον ἔσχε γλῶσσαν, αἰσχίστην νόσον.” Heraclitus is quoting from Euripides’ *Orestes* line 10, where Elektra describes Tantalos.

²⁹ This may not be entirely my fancy. The association may be intended by Euripides: κόλαψ also means a progenitor, a stem of the family tree, which is what Tantalos is for Elektra.

³⁰ Chastisement might conjure up castration, after all: a *verbex* is a wether.

Homer is also problematic for Plutarch. In his essay on adolescent reading habits (*Πῶς δεῖ τὸν νέον ποιημάτων ἀκούειν*, “How the Young Man Should Study Poetry”), he asks why certain nugatory verses excite the interest of boys, apart from the moral lessons to be gleaned by a less close reading. “But nowadays most young men very briskly demand the reason of such trivial speeches as these, and enquire in what sense they are spoken,” offering a line from the *Iliad* as example: “ὅς δέ κ' ἀνὴρ ἀπὸ ὕπνον ὄχέων ἔτερ' ἄρμαθ' ἵκηται / ἔγχει ὄρεξάσθω.” A literal rendering is: “The man who reaches another chariot from his chariot is to reach out with his spear.”³¹ Certainly, the extension of the weapon would be at the root of a young man’s prurient attention. Both ἔγχος (lance) and ὄρέγω (to extend; to lunge) allow a lascivious interpretation. Adams cites ἔγχος as an example of the weapon-as-penis metaphor. “ἔγχος,” he says, “of course suggests the penis. It was not unusual in ancient humour for epic verses and situations to be deliberately misinterpreted in a sexual sense.” For example, he notes, the emperor Vespasian, prone to classical quotation, described a well-endowed man with the Homeric “μακρὰ βιβάς, κραδάων δολιχόσκιον ἔγχος” (Striding along and waving a lance that casts a long shadow).³² ὄρέγω can mean “to grasp at a thing.” Thus, the charioteer is urged to grasp at his opponent’s “lance” when in close quarters. In a less bellicose context, ὄρέγω means to yearn for, sometimes in a sexual sense: the unnatural desire identified in Paul’s letter to the Romans is called ὄρεξις, lust. Nor are these the only semantically charged words in Plutarch’s brief lines. Ικετεύω, another verb

³¹ This is the translation of Philemon Probert in *Early Greek Relative Clauses*, (Oxford) Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 131.

³² *Iliad* 7.213. At least according to Suetonius, who offers the anecdote in his life of Vespasian (23.1).

signifying “to reach,” also means to beseech, and is used to refer to sexual opportunity in

Xenophon’s *Ephesiaca* 3.2.³³

The words for chariot, here, are ὄχος and ἄρμα. ἄρμα refers to a two-wheeled chariot, or a team, an easy vehicle for the testes. (The word appears in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, adding resonance to the allegory of the charioteer.) ἄρμα also means union or love. Plutarch, himself, uses the word to mean “union” and says Delphians called Venus by this name: Ότι τὴν Ἀφροδίτην “Ἄρμα” καλοῦσιν. *A propos* of the other chariot ὄχέων (from ὄχος): the same word, is a form of the verb ὄχέω, “to mount,” “to cover,” “to copulate.” When defining *supervenio* (“to stud”), Adams uses the Greek word as a synonym. It also means “to hold fast” (echoed in ὄρέγω’s “grasp”) and to ride or to let another ride. Plutarch’s precocious readers would be titillated to imagine the grabby horsemen jockeying for position.

Anticipating Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” by more than a millennium, Plutarch’s text is an argument against allegorization of Homer and as an interpretive tool, in general. (Allegory, here, encompasses all forms of double-speak and ambiguity.) It is striking, then, that dubious language is not absent from Plutarch’s own dismissal of hidden meanings. For example, he elsewhere advises his correspondent to offer the essay to his son, lest he succumb to alluring language.³⁴ Finding a recherché comparison for the problematic consumption of poetry, he likens

³³ Ἡράσθην δὲ τὰ πρῶτα ἐν γυμνασίοις διαπαλαίοντα ἴδων καὶ οὐκ ἐκαρτέρησα. Ἔορτῆς ἀγομένης ἐπιχωρίου καὶ παννυχίδος ἐπ’ αὐτῆς πρόσειμι τῷ Ὑπεράνθῃ καὶ ίκετεύω κατοικεῖρα· ἀκοῦσαν δὲ τὸ μειράκιον πάντα ὑπισχνεῖται κατελεῆσάν με. (I first fell in love with him when I saw his wrestling exploits in the gymnasium and I could not contain myself; during a local festival with an all-night vigil I approached Hyperanthes and begged him to take pity on me.) Text taken from *The Recollections of Encolpius: The Satyrica of Petronius as Milesian Fiction* by Gottskálk Jensson. Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library (2004) p. 89. The translation is by Graham Anderson, “An Ephesian Tale,” in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, edited by Bryan P. Reardon, Berkeley: University of California Press (2008).

³⁴ Plutarch says the young Cleander is εὐαγωγοτέραν, liable to be led, easily cultivated. Embedded in the word is the root ἀγωγή, training, whence pedagogue. An ἀγωγή is also a

it to a cephalopod: “They say of the fish called polypus that ‘His head in one respect is very good, /But in another very naughty food,’”³⁵ where the caution is as much corporeal as culinary. Surely, the aviso pertains as much to the penis as to poetry, for both have authorized and illegitimate uses. The point that poetry may be beneficial or noxious is plain; in what way the polypus/penis can be “eaten” with impunity (or not) is left for the reader to decipher.³⁶

powerful love charm. Plutarch alludes such a talisman a few lines later, when he describes poetry thus: “ἔνθ’ ἔνι μὲν φιλότης, ἐν δ’ ἴμερος, ἐν δ’ ὀαριστὺς / πάρφασις, ἡ τ’ ἔκλεψε νόον πύκα περ φρονεόντων.” This is a line from the *Iliad* (XIV.216) where Hera importunes Aphrodite for her magical girdle: “[T]here is love-making, desire, and bantering persuasion—which steals away the mind of even those who think prudently.” For more on antique love magic see *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, (edited by Thomas K. Hubbard) and Eleni Pachoumi’s “The Erotic and Separation Spells of the Magical Papyri and Defixiones,” in *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 294–325.

The *agoge* of the Spartans—the homosexual abduction and military training of ephebes—may also suggest what sort of interpretive impulse Cleander might be carried away by. Plutarch, of course, was familiar with the *agoge*; he begins his account of the life of Agesilaus with a description of the practice, and his Lycurgus commends the institution at length, including its promotion of same-sex affection: “Moreover, though this sort of love was so approved among them that even the maidens found lovers in good and noble women, still, there was no jealous rivalry in it, but those who fixed their attentions on the same boys made this rather a foundation for friendship with one another, and persevered in common efforts to make their loved one as noble as possible.”

³⁵ Πουλύποδος κεφαλῇ ἔνι μὲν κακὸν ἐν δὲ καὶ ἐσθλόν.

³⁶ My inkling that the octopus encompassed a sexual sense to a Greek audience is borne out by C.A. Shaw’s “‘Genitalia of the Sea’: Seafood and Sexuality in Greek Comedy,” in *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014): 554–576.

The octopus in Alexis’s fragment has similar phallic associations, but it is even more complex in its relationship with genitalia. The form of the octopus, particularly its tentacles, is suggestive of the male genitalia, but the term *πουλύποντος/πολύποντος* (‘octopus’ or ‘polyp’, literally ‘much-foot’) also works as a sexual pun on its own, since the term *πούς* (‘foot’) can be used as a double entendre to indicate the phallus/glans.

The octopus is called ἀνόστεος—“boneless one”—by Hesiod (*Works and Days* 524), which is an apt description of the penis. Fragments of Greek comedy give tantalizing glimpses of the potential of the figurative meaning of the cephalopod. Ameipsias in *The Glutton* suggests, “I want, it seems, a heap of polypi,” while Plato the Comic’s *Phaon* (ll. 17–18) advises, “If you tenderize the tentacle of the octopus at just the right moment, it is far better boiled than baked, at

The garden god in *Priapeia* 68 engages in a sexual rereading of Homer. In this interpretation, the incidents of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are motivated by the *mentula*, prompted by desire for the *cunnus*. Accordingly, the language is translated by this light. In an eromeneutic variation on Homeric allegorization, the sexually suggestive is not finessed away, but Eros is read *into* the text.

Rusticus indocte si quid dixisse videbor,
da veniam: libros non lego, poma lego.
sed rudis hic dominum totiens audire legentem
cogor Homereas edidicique notas.
ille vocat, quod nos psolen, psoloenta keraunon,
et quod nos colum, kouleon ille vocat.
“merdaleon” certe nisi res non munda vocatur,
et pediconum mentula merdalea est.

If in what I say I seem an unlearned rustic,
Pardon me: I gather apples not knowledge.
Still, uncultivated, I was forced to hear my master
reading Homer so often, I’ve learned the Homeric signs.
What we call “prick,” he calls a “smutty shaft of lightning;”
We call it an “asshole;” he, a “sheath.”
If nothing else, something indecent is “dangerous,”
And a buttfucker’s cock is “dung-erous.”

In this translation of empire, Priapus attends to individual words and gives new, renewed, or expanded meaning to the Greek lexicon. In exploiting the phonetic³⁷ similarity between benign Greek words and obscene Latin ones, the ‘rude’ god recasts the scholars’ epic as scurrilous

least if it’s a large one.” Here, “the focus of the scene in Plato’s fr. 189 K.–A. is not so much on parodying [a culinary poem by] Philoxenus as on the humorous lucubrations about achieving an erect phallus.” (R.M. Rosen. “Plato Comicus and the Evolution of Greek Comedy.” Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/6)

³⁷ The repeated use of *vocat*, *vocat*, and *vocatur*, as well as the words *dixisse* and *audire*, make the importance of aurality even more pronounced. That said, *lego*, *lego*, and *legentem* put a different emphasis on the written character of the work. The poet shows us that the wordplay can work on the level of sound or sign, and later symbol. (*Nota bene*: Priapus’ *nota* as a musical note, and as the written letter signifies both what’s heard and what’s read.)

epigram. And while adopting this ignorant posture, the *Priapeia* poet flaunts his urbanity and ingenuity. The bumpkin's reading is not only a comically fruitful misprision; the gloss concentrates our attention on the Latin and Greek, themselves. First, we recognize that the words are not merely obscene when (mis)transliterated; the originals, too, permit an obscene interpretation. *Psoloenta*, or ψολόεντα, which has the meaning (*Liddell-Scott*) of "sooty" or "smoky," appears to contain the words ψωλή and σωλήν. Ψωλή is the word for the penis (with retracted prepuce); σωλήν (pipe) is an easy metonym for the penis, in general. Hesychius says σωλήν is the "membrum virile." The association may be reinforced by the word's piscatory application: it is the razorfish, which can also be a vehicle for the male anatomy. Σωλήν appears in a comic fragment to this effect. Javier Verdejo Manchado offers a translation and analysis, which I translate here:

There is another clear play on words with an obscene double meaning, this time referring to the mourners, which we meet in fragment 23: "Well, my dear what are these long mussels? Certainly, they are cockles with tasty meat, gulped down by widows." The fragment is transmitted by Demetrius (*de Elocutione* 151) in the same context as the prior example, and constitutes, as well, an example of the dual sense of the word, both ingenious and obscene...³⁸

³⁸ Otro claro juego de palabras con doble sentido obsceno, esta vez referente a los consoladores, lo encontramos en el fr. 23:—'Εντί ποκα, φίλα, τοίδε τοὶ μακροὶ κόγχοι;—σωλῆνές θην τοῦτοι γα, γλυκύκρεον κογχύλιον, χηρᾶν γυναικῶν λίχνευμα, “—Entonces, ¿qué son, querida, estas conchas largas?—Lo que es esas son navajas, por cierto, un molusquito de sabrosa carne, golosina de viudas”. El fragmento es transmitido por Demetrio (eloc. 151) en el mismo contexto que el anterior, y constituye, por tanto, un ejemplo de texto con doble sentido, ingenioso, y obsceno [...]

From "La comicidad de lo obsceno en los fragmentos de Sofrón." *Habis* 42, Universidad de Sevilla (2011) pp. 45–63. My translation is based on Manchado's Spanish version. He identifies the merchandise as *navajas*, razor-back clams, but I wanted English double entendres, so I plumped for "mussel" and "cockles." The poem is examined for its erotic content by Carl Shaw ("Genitalia of the Sea," p. 9), who gives greater background:

The term σωλήν was often used as a comic allusion to the penis because, as Dalby (2003, 279) notes, "the creature which owns the shell has a distinctly phallic shape and indecently protrudes in the course of cooking." Archilochus

The thing described as “smokey” in the Homeric tag is κεραυνός, a thunderbolt, an aptly grandiose metonym for penis to the fulminating Priapus. It seems not to have been used in a phallic sense in Greek. Besides the force (and shape?) of Zeus’ bolt, it may suggest “penis” because it suggests a root in κέρας, horn, which was used in a sexual sense according to Henderson (“appears in comedy only in double entendres,” p. 127). The word is near enough to *cornus* or *corona* to suggest a bilingual pun on the prick or glans. I am inclined to think that Priapus is going further to establish his critical bona fides by using this term. The professional emendation of ancient texts by the *grammatici* used a number of critical marks to signal their interference, such as the *obelus* (—); the *aversa obelismene* (←); the *corona* (matchCondition), and the *ancora inferior* (↗).³⁹ The *ceraunium*, too, is such a symbol. It signalled suspect verses—a way, perhaps, for Priapus to draw attention to his own dubious passage. It resembles the opening of the anus: *. Priapus uses his knowledge of these *nota* in an act of exegetical exhibitionism.

About the *nota ceraunium* Steinova (270) tells us, “It is one of the signs of which it is difficult to say whether they were actually used and what their function was. According to a scholion to *Odyssey* 18.282, Aristophanes of Byzantium, Aristarchus’ predecessor, placed the

uses it sexually in fragment 46; and when, in Sophron’s *Mimoi Gunaikeioi* K-A 23, one woman asks another what she is looking at, she gets the response “razorfish, a delicacy for widowed women.” Here, as Hordern (2004, 157–8) points out, the women are referring specifically to dildos, but more typically the word’s secondary meaning signifies the penis. *LSJ* observes the phallic implications of σωλήν in Sophron’s fragment, and the same interpretation should be applied to Epicharmus’ use of the term.

³⁹ I’ve picked these as examples because their names and shapes are sexually suggestive. Suetonius and Servius wrote on the use of diacritical marks, as did Greek writers, whence their names.

κεραύνιον next to this verse because it was ‘mean’.”⁴⁰ If the *Priapeia* poet assumes familiarity with the scholiasts—his own poem is a commentary on Homer, after all—the reader should recall that line. It occurs in the description of Penelope’s deception of her suitors:

θέλγε δέ θυμόν
μειλιχίοις ἐπέεσσι, νόος δέ οἱ ἄλλα μενοίνα.

⁴⁰ What Aristophanes found “mean” (εὐτελής, cheap or tawdry) about the line is unclear, although the scholiast athetised the following lines (Iliad 24.6–9), calling them εὐτελής, too:

Longing for manly, courageous, strong Patroclus,
For all he’d done with him, all the pain they’d suffered,
As they’d gone through wars with other men and with the perilous sea
As he kept remembering, he cried heavy tears.

These lines (at least here in Ian Johnston’s English version) are certainly easy to queer. The longing (ποθέων) and suffering (πάθεν) and the doing (enduring, in Greek τολυπεύω) and the going through (πείρω, piercing, “mostly of meat” in *LSJ*) suggests sexual metaphors to me. And the emphasis on the manly (ἀνδροτῆτά, μένος, ἀνδρῶν: manhood, might, and men) only underlines the effeminate attitude of Achilles—tossing and crying unmanfully. Even the expression “ἀλεγεινά τε κύματα πείρων” (he had passed through perilous waves) could be stretched to accommodate the reading “the painful swelling thing pierced you.” If it be objected that κύματα generally referred to the sea, and its meaning ought not be twisted in this way, I reply only that the word itself originates in metaphor. κύω is “to swell” and has a definite sexual suggestiveness, meaning “to conceive,” “to be pregnant with” and (of males) to impregnate. The final line, “τῶν μιμησκόμενος θαλερὸν κατὰ δάκρυον εἶβεν” (Remembering this, he let drop the swelling tears), engages the commonplace analogy of one bodily fluid to another. Here, this δάκρυον (anything that drops like tears; sap or resin) may be spurts of semen that Patroclus’ memory excites. The drops are described as θαλερὸν, abundant (also thick and frequent; torrential, impassioned), a word derived from θάλλω or θαλέω (to sprout, grow sturdy or to become full, to swell). Such an analogy of tears and sperm was made by Basil the Great, who wrote, “επειδή το δάκρυον τούτο οιονέι σπέρμα καὶ δάνεισμα γίνεται τῆς αἰώνιου χαράς” (Whereas, tears are as it were the semen/seed which gives rise to eternal joy.) Whether it was the sexual ambiguity of the lines or the weakness of Achilles that found disfavor I cannot say. This reading is entirely my own. I give myself great license here, as the words—the near rhymes πάθος and πόθος, suffering and desire—caused even Aristotle trouble. Basil’s comment comes from “Homilia de Gratiarum Actione” in Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae Tomus XXXI*, p. 228 A 9.

In *The Idea of Ancient Literary Criticism*, Yun Lee Too describes Plutarch’s wrestling with the lines and the Alexandrian critic’s verdict. Yun tells us that the word εὐτελές is synonymous with ἀπρεπές, which signals impropriety, concluding “it is evident that one concern of Alexandrian criticism was to regulate sexually through its representation” (pp. 146–47). The athetising of the lines is also examined in online posts to a group editing the Iliad chapter, il24-A wiki. See <https://github.com/hmteeditors/il24-A/wiki/Blog-Post> and the related post <https://github.com/hmteeditors/il24-A/wiki/Seminar-Presentation>

That is, “[She] bewitched their minds with caressing words, but her meaning grasped at something else.” Is Priapus hinting here at his own forked tongue, his double meanings? Likewise, Priapus’ *kouleon* (κολεόν) is more than sonically similar to *culus*. Since it means “sheath” it is morphologically—therefore metaphorically—akin to *anus*. (Like Latin *vagina*.) Having established that κολεόν is rendered as *culus* in Latin, the linguidexterous takes the next step, and renders this term back into Greek. The associations are intriguing. Κωλῆ, thigh, is of course cock. Κόλος means docked; and χωλός, lame. Χυλός is juice; χολάς, bowels; and κόλον brings us down to colon. The κολεόν-*culus*, then, evokes a damaged, docked dick as well as an asshole dripping fluid from the guts. (Χυλός is not just juice, it is bile, and corresponds to our chyle, a milky bodily fluid. Via Latin corruption the word also produced *chymus*, our chyme, or stomach juices. It is associated with lientery, an especially violent diarrhea of undecocited food (also χυλός), and the iliac passion, the vomiting of fecal matter, solidifying the associations between χυλός and *culus*.⁴¹ If this were not enough, χυλός is “flavor,” and χολή is gall, venom, or any disgusting liquid; these link the *culus* phonetically and semantically to the mouth and tongue.

Priapus calls the Homeric texts *nota*, that is simply “letters.” With its meaning of “critical remark” the word also tells us that he knows how such criticism is done, and admits himself into a rarified, urban coterie of experts. What’s more, mastery of *nota*—as “secret language” or “cipher”—enables him to perform a hieratic hermeneutics. There is another nice confluence of meanings in this one word, for it designates the mark that censors assigned to immoral citizens,

⁴¹ A similar word, κοῖλος (“hollow” and “concave”) has similar connotations. It names bodily cavities (including the digestive *cava*—think colostomy), and this idea of hollowness is at the root of the Greek κόλπος, *vagina*. κοῖλος also implies emptiness, a void of content, so a kuleos-κοῖλος lien suggests the evacuated asshole. (Or cunt. Κοῖλος is the embryonic sac.) κοιλία are the stomach, guts, and womb. Oh yes, it is also shit.

or any sign of shame. Lastly, *nota* is Nature's signifier: the *membrum virile*. Priapus has hold of, is master of, Homer's little man. The word encapsulates Priapus' project: a phallogocentric refashioning of the classics. This appears in line with communicating his general sexual menace. What he elsewhere only threatens, he accomplishes here: He aggressively inserts "prick"—his prick—into the text. And, as he "reads Homer," he rapes or irrumates the author, too.⁴²

I imagine some may see my own eromeneutic interpretations as similarly demented by the mentula, made *demens* by my demons. If, like Priapus, I have prick on the brain, I can only answer that his critique is not wrong: the actions of Agamemnon, Helen, Achilles, Ulysses, Calypso and Circe can all be seen as manifestations of Eros' influence.

Priapus, like the riddle object, is two things at once. God and idol. The male organ is mighty (as all-powerful Phallus) and weak (as all-too-fallible flesh). Even as a cultured artifact, he does not lose his nature, he is also always wood. The statue is susceptible to outward forces: ravages of weather and age and the importuning of pathic thieves or licentious witches. In this context wood, itself, becomes identical with the penis: at times hard and useful, otherwise fissile or useless. In some ways, duality or doubleness is an inherent aspect of Priapus. As a god with two natures, he is like Christ (*anima* and *materia*, numinous and phenomenal). As a speaking *thing*, he is akin to man, whose *natura* he shares (and magnifies, and apotheosizes).

Dilwyn Knox (pp. 44, 121) writes that, besides Homer, latterly Pythagoras and Plato were sometimes understood to have spoken cryptically to conceal sacred mysteries. He notes that the *Liber philosophorum moralium*, he notes informs its reader that "*Et ostendit scientiam suam per allegoriam occultans eam, ut ipsam non intelligeret nisi sapiens*" (And [Plato] revealed his

⁴² If we understand Priapus' exercise as "putting words into Homer's mouth," this entire poem—which goes through the epics, from Agamemnon at Troy to Odysseus in Ithaka—is a thorough face-fucking.

knowledge through allegory, hiding what should not be understood, except to those in the know).

One notes a strange coincidence by which both the sordid and the sacred demand secrecy. Also the tendency of some to sacralize the sexual, and of others to eroticize the ritual. It is for the psychiatrist or philosopher to determine why that which is open only to the elect leads the uninitiated to imagine licentious rites—whether the Eleusinian mysteries, the rites of the Bona Dea, or the practices of certain early Christian gnostics.)⁴³ Of course there *were* sects where sex played a part, like the *galli*, who castrated themselves in the name of Cybele or Attis. The veil of allegory is not a safeguard to modesty, but an invitation to disclothe and disclose what is hidden

Classical texts, of course, are not alone in their ambiguity. In *Against Marcion* Tertullian describes the manner in which enigmatic Bible scriptures are to be understood: “*Species erit qua pleraque figurate portenduntur per aenigmata et allegorias et parabolas, aliter intellegenda quam scripta sunt*” (Another type are those where very many events are predicted figuratively, through enigmas and allegories and parables, to be understood in a sense different from what is written). Alain de Lille and Peter Damian both wrote exegeses on the *Song of Songs*. Both were adepts at allegoresis—turning the secular/sexual hypotext into sacred/spiritual hypertext. My project is also one of allegorization, of reading or finding alternative meaning in irregular Latin texts.⁴⁴

If Ovid’s “*quaeque latent meliora putant*” could be applied to readers of classical texts, interpreters of the Bible might adopt as their motto the tag from Proverbs 25:2: “*Gloria Dei*

⁴³ Curiously, the “profane” is precisely that which is not admitted into the temple (*pro fano*).

⁴⁴ If, like Peter Damian’s blasphemia-sodomia parallel, I may model new terms on another: beyond allegory we attempt lagnegory, to interpret sexually; beside analogy, lagnology, to produce sexual metaphors; aside from philology, philolagny, the study of sex in literature. In short, a sexegetical praxis.

celare verbum et gloria regum investigare sermonem” (It is the glory of God to conceal the word and the glory of kings to decipher language). One of the principal texts that demanded such allegorization—and around which the technique developed—is the *Song of Songs*. It is not incidental here that the Septuagint word translated as *investigare* is τιμάω, to revere, and also to assign a value to. In noting that the Lord uses profane language in scripture. Gregory the Great on the *Song of Songs* writes:

This is why in the book called the *Song of Songs* words of fleshly love, as it were, are set down. Whence, excited from its torpor by idiomatic language, the soul grows hot again, and through expression of the love which is below, it is stimulated toward the love above. Kisses, breasts, cheeks, and thighs are named in this book. This holy presentation is not made laughable by these words, rather the indulgence of God is to be contemplated. For while the book names the members of the body and provokes us toward lust, it is to be remarked how marvelously and mercifully He operates on us. In order to inflame our heart to the incitement of sacred love, the Song goes so far as to expand and extend the language of our filthy sex. While humbling himself by speaking thus, he exalts us through understanding, for from where God lowers himself by speaking, he lifts us up there by understanding. For we are taught in the language of eros, by whose power we burn with love for the Divinity.⁴⁵

In showing how low or ludicrous language can direct one’s thought toward the lofty Logos, Gregory performs the opposite operation. His language of exaltation and incensement

⁴⁵ See *On the Song of Songs* *Gregory the Great*, translation and introduction by Mark DelCogliano, p. The Latin (lines 8–24 from CCSL 144) is:

Hinc est enim, quod in hoc libro, qui in canticis canticorum conscriptus est, amoris quasi corporei uerba ponuntur: ut a torpore suo anima per sermones suae consuetudinis refricata recalescat et per uerba amoris, qui infra est, excitetur ad amorem, qui supra est. Nominantur enim in hoc libro oscula, nominantur ubera, nominantur genae, nominantur femora; in quibus uerbis non irridenda est sacra descriptio, sed maior dei misericordia consideranda est: quia, dum membra corporis nominat et sic ad amorem uocat, notandum est quam mirabiliter nobis cum et misericorditer operatur, qui, ut cor nostrum ad instigationem sacri amoris accenderet, usque ad turpis amoris nostri uerba distendit. Sed, unde se loquendo humiliat, inde nos intellectu exaltat: quia ex sermonibus huius amoris discimus, qua uirtute in diuinitatis amore ferueamus.

overwhelm us with a sense of erection and incitement to lust.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, in discussing the sexually ambiguous language of the Bible, Gregory, himself, employs such dubious expressions. The reader is rubbed, hotted up, and aroused (*refrico, recalesco, excito*) from a state (*torpor*) that resembles sexual flaccidity as much as moral stupor. The idea of sexual excitement is also continued in *instigatio, accendo*, and *ferveo* (stimulation, to enflame, to boil over). It is acknowledged that words, themselves, may prompt erection, but these words suggest physical manipulation by hand or mouth. (Which is as it should be, for these are the means by which scripture, too, is promulgated.) According to Adams (184), “The predominating sexual meaning of *frico* is ‘masturbate’,” and he provides a handful of examples, including Petronius’ “*tanto magis expedit inguina quam ingenia fricare*” (It is so much more profitable to stroke one’s cock than stretch one’s intellect). Adams also notes that in time the word tended to be applied to insertive sex acts (as did other terms for masturbation). Adams notes that the language of burning was a common metaphor for sexual acts. One’s ass might be burnt fucking⁴⁷ or one’s cock by sucking, as in the inscription “*Maria Urit Fellat Bene*” (*CIL IV.1840*), that is, Maria inflames me, she fellates so well. *Foveo* (not that different from Gregory’s *ferveo*) appears in the *Priapea* (83.25) to mean masturbation: “*puella nec iocosa te levi manu / fovebit apprimetve lucidum femur*” (A wanton girl will neither kindle you with her light hand, nor press against you her glistening thigh). *Femur*, of course, is a frequent euphemism for the genitals, familiar to

⁴⁶ This playfulness regarding sacred literature need not suggest that the author takes his topic lightly. As Christopher Isherwood illuminates a latterday ludic impulse: “You see, true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.” This oft-quoted definition appears in *The World in the Evening* (1954) p. 125.

⁴⁷ An inscription on a coin issued under Commodus authorized it “Herculi Romano Agusto” (By Augustus, the Roman Hercules). An image of the hero’s club bisects the phrase, so its right-hand section of the sesterce asserts “*culi ano ustō*” (With the ring of his asshole enflamed).

medieval readers from both pagan authors and sacred texts, like the *Song of Songs*. The association of the thigh with the sexual organs may depend on their proximity. Such love is not only lowly (*infra*) by virtue of its position vis à vis the divine, but also by its locus: the lower bodily stratum.

The original writers of biblical texts might be confounded by the reliance on allegory as access route towards truth, yet this approach proved to be a fount for creative and useful interpretation, and, perhaps, preserved the texts, by making them new. To Origen's tripartite division of allegory—literal, moral, mystical—I add another: the sexual.⁴⁸ We might add *caro* or *sensus* (σάρξ and αἰσθήσεις; *sarx* and *aistheseis*) as fourth category of intellection: not understanding a text as it relates to bodies in time and space (history), but to bodies in pleasure and imagination, in sex. The aim is to read like Chaucer's Jankyn, who could *glose* a text, explore its sexual body.

Is the action of the biblical Sodomites—their assault on the holy visitors—an analogy for the assault on language and meaning (and, therefore, social order) that these authors perpetrate? Is the intention to, in effect, turn them to vile uses? Or do they deny us definite access to language, like Lot *post tergum adcludens ostium* (closing the door behind him)?⁴⁹ Are we cast as the Sodomites, grasping blindly for a way to—and into—meaning? Does the angelic body represent some phantom dream of natural, authoritative linguistic integrity?⁵⁰

⁴⁸ These are adumbrated under the figures of *corpus*, *anima*, and *spiritus* in Latin translations of Origen's *soma*, *psyche*, *pneuma*.

⁴⁹ Does Lot close the door behind him as he stands outside? Has the guardian of language locked himself out, along with us, from access, from intelligibility?

⁵⁰ The stability of language, its ability to name things definitively, is undermined in this Bible text, which cannot decide on the nature of the visitors—designated as both *angeli* and *virii*.

If words express truth (or contain it), and words can be obscene, then truth as well can be obscene. Martial suggested as much when he refers to “*lascivam verborum veritatem, id est epigrammaton linguam*” (the lascivious truth of [my] words, that is the language of epigram). Poetry’s lecherous *lingua*, its language, is also a lickerish tongue, improper, even tasteless. The poet whose tonguetext delights the reader is a sexual reprobate. The reader, as interpreter, can act indecently, too. Martial knew this “*Inprobe*,” he says, “*facit qui in alieno libro ingeniosus est*” (He acts improperly who exercises his ingenuity on the books of others). Here it is the ingenuity—the intelligence, the originality, and the peculiar personality—of the exegete that is figured as a transgressive member, a penis entering off-limit terrain. This sense of *ingenium* as penis, no doubt owes something to *ingigno* (whence it derives): to implant or engender. It may also be suggested by a phonetic and lexical similarity with *inguen*, the crotch or cock. *Inprobus* is not without sexual strength, either; it denotes what is base, vile, or shameless. Martial, himself, shows it has a sexual sense in his line “*lambebat medios improba lingua uiros*” (He licked men’s middles with abandoned tongue). Martial imagines the excessively creative reading of his text as a sexual infringement on his book and, by extension, himself. The reader becomes the *fututor* or *irrumator*; the book, the author’s ass or mouth. However, where Martial saw such reading as invasion or infraction, I encourage the infringement, the use (and abuse) of texts for peculiar pleasure. By this method we make the distant books of others (*alienos libros*) into different books (also *alienos libros*), into the opposite type of books (*libros propios*), into our own books (also *libros propios*), into filthy books (*libros improprios*).⁵¹ This improper

⁵¹ Elsewhere (1.38) Martial rails against the mere reciting of his text as a violation or theft. To read aloud is not allowed: “*Quem recitas meus est, o Fidentine, libellus: / sed male cum recitas, incipit esse tuus*” (What you recite, Fidentius, is my book, but since you do so badly it begins to become your own). Before the reconstruction of Latin, a reader might detect an indictment for foolish tastelessness, here: *incipit esse* resembles *insipidus* and *insipiens*. N. B. Halhed picked up on a anti-effeminate register in the poem (or placed a queer interpretation into his translation):

appropriation does not annihilate the original but anneals it, makes it stronger by immersion in my method.

Halperin, writing in *How to Be Gay* (p. 375), posits that gay style and culture (and, presumably, being) is not situated along a continuum of masculinity and femininity; it is not between these poles (if they *are* poles), but simultaneously around and beyond them. (As it must, as gayness is an expression—or expressions—of sexuality, not of sex or gender.) But we should not, therefore, imagine sexual expression or representation on a linear model, but as more spacious, multidimensional. It does not have nodes, but modes: asexual, pansexual, polysexual, hetero-, homo-, and solo. (With no particular ethical, moral, social, or aesthetic priority, superiority, value, or degree.) Again, we can engage the idea of the atomic cloud: sexual expression is like lawless language, itself, not fixed or singular, but multiple and malleable. Sex, even gay sex, alone, is multivalent, multifarious, multiform; frenetic and polyphrenic and free.

Gay male culture does not exactly position its subjects at some intermediary point—halfway, say—between masculinity and femininity. It affords an alternative, a new set of possibilities. Just as the counter-thematics of style can be reduced neither to content nor to form, which means such counter-thematics can be pegged neither to masculinity nor to femininity, and should not therefore be confused either with depth of hidden meaning or the meaningless, purely sensuous sheen of surfaces, so gay male culture’s melodramatic style allows no calamity, and no emotion that calamity awakens, to be perceived as purely tragic or purely pathetic. Hence gay male culture’s melodramatic style treats love not as pure passion or pure irony, but always as something else that, rather than existing somewhere in between the two, incorporates elements of both while departing from them.⁵²

“With fruity accents, and so vile a tone, You quote my lines, I took them for your own.” (See *Imitations of Some of the Epigrams of Martial, Part 1*, by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, R. Faulder (London) 1793, p. 2.) In his *Cento Nuptialis* Ausonius aggressively asserts his own authorship of the work, even though the words are Vergil’s: “*Accipe igitur opusculum de inconnexis continuum, de diversis unum, de seriis ludicrum, de alieno nostrum*” (So, accept this ditty, the unconnected made continuous; the several, one; the serious laughable; another’s, ours). *He* will decide what the words mean by appropriation and disposition. Is it transformed, transmuted? Is it his or does it belong to Vergil? Or is the readerly relationship reified?

⁵² David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (2014) p. 375.

Halperin seems too wedded to the notion that the masculine, muscular, mature beauty only is worthy of reverence, likely to elicit desire. This betrays his contingency. There may come a time (again) when the foppish, feminine, and frail are objects of adoration. The waiflike actor Ben Whishaw is such an object for the comedian Simon Amstell, and it is this quality which makes the actor's Richard II so much more appealing than the hyper-masculinity of Rory Kinnear's bully Bolingbroke.⁵³ Whishaw seems the epitome of William Morris "medievalism." What of the eroticized effeminate beauty and abjection of St. Sebastian? We should eschew the binary that Halperin emphasizes—the polarity, the dichotomy—and embrace the "duality," the hermaphroditic, the versatile, labile and elaborate, which is not reductive but additive.

Halperin points out Sontag's failure to imagine a hermeneutics of style: "Gay male culture's investment in style as a thematic of its own implies a uniquely gay male form of reading[. . . G]ay male culture itself is a form of understanding, a way of seeing men, women, and the world." It is in just such an enterprise which I aim to engage. Carolyn Dinshaw's eunuch hermeneutics grapples with notions of loss, lack, and failure—the asexual or antisexual. I propose an hermaphrodite epideictic to engage excess, doubling, and the polymorphic—the transexual, plenisexual, pansexual, and pro-sexual. Such a reading is not necessarily gay, but trans. Again, not nodal but modal. As in melodrama, where the tragic and pathetic appear as passion and irony, together. In "going beyond" the pathetic, such tragedy as transcendental, triumphant. Rather than Narcissus and Echo, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis become models for aesthetic enjoyment, not the impenetrability of surfaces (the mirror) or disembodied reproduction

⁵³ As seen in the *Richard II* episode of Rupert Goold's 2012 BBC television trilogy *The Hollow Crown*.

(the echo), but incorporation and integration. We concoct a new taxonomy for Foucault's "utterly confused category." Not confusion, but fusion.

The narcissist homosexual looks for his reflection in society and culture; not finding one, he is left with no object to love and—by very nature of his desire—is unloved. A frustrated narcissism may prompt him to fashion a distorted mirror that returns an anamorphic image of straight reality which can only be seen aright from a privileged—gay—vantage point. It is a sort of pervert's perspective.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ As in rhetoric, the visual arts offer means—like allegory or anamorphosis—whereby daring or dangerous or dirty subjects can be presented to the unwitting viewer. Leonardo's Eye is a well-known example. Head-on, it is an undecipherable sketch, wrinkles about a dark center, something like a vortex, or anus, or vagina. Seen askance, with one eye, it resolves itself into an image of an eye. It is the oblique which delivers the image to us; the eccentric is the ideal vantage and the ideal viewer. It is also true that gay men have often needed to regard desired men in stealth, obliquely or beneath lowered lids. This squinting scrutiny is a sign of the Sodomite in Dante's hell (*Inf.* 15.17–21):

e ciascunaci
riguardava come suol da sera
guardare uno altro sotto nuova luna;
e sì ver' noi aguzzavan le ciglia
come 'l vecchio sartor fa ne la cruna.

And each
Looked at us, as men at dusk are used
To peruse each other beneath a new moon,
And knit their brows at us
Like an old tailor eyes a needle's eye.
(My translation)

There may be a link between the words "askant," "asquint," and French *ensconcé*, hidden. (A. Liberman, "A few samples from the A-section of the prospective Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology (*ache, akimbo, aloof, and askance*)" in *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia* vol. 19, Krakow (2014) pp. 117–141.) *Queer*, itself, it is suggested, may have its root in Germanic *quer*, oblique. The queer critic should regard his texts this way, simultaneously searching and suspicious, attentive yet tentative, as if queer were Latin *quaero*, totally unrelated etymologically but suggestive of a similar cruisy impulse: to search, to question, and to need; to look, to lack, to long; inquire, require, desire.

In presenting a distorted eye to our eye, which must squint to see it, Leonardo devises a conundrum about perspective and subjectivity; the seer, the seen, and *scientia*. A nearby image

Prior scholars (of friendship, say) denature the sodomitical, render writers sexless, eunuchize and euphemize the erotic writing of the past. Instead, I seek to sodomize these texts—not to remove the penis, but to retain and return the penis to them.

For a queer reader like me, intuition is a goad toward introition. A certain prompting urges me to interject, inject myself into the text, to enter it as a sexual actor. Or, insofar as I interpellate, impose myself between text and other readers, I entice as sexual factor, as pander or bawd. The medieval *accessus* offered the reader an approach by which he might understand a written work, by explaining its *intentio*, *modus*, and *ordo*, among other textual qualities. To *accede* to a text was not only to approach it but to enter into it. The student attentive to nuance, would also recognize in this a solicitation. *Accedo*, we recall, signifies the invitation made to a prostitute. The text, then, is available for sexual pleasure, and exegesis itself is imagined to be a type of erotic incursion. *Accedo* is a Vulgate euphemism for *coire*: *Lev. 18.19* “*ad mulierem, quae patitur menstrua, non accedes*” (Do not go in to—or, into—a woman suffering menstruation).

in the sketchbook is the forced perspective of an infant, suggesting, perhaps, that the black hole which confounds the viewer’s eye is meant to be read as the vagina, after all. In his anatomy, Leonardo couples the vagina with the anus. The first is a black cavern; the second, a flower. Da Vinci offers a “Definition of the closing of six gaps in the skin; that is the eyes, nostrils, mouth, vulva, penis and anus—and the heart although it is not made of skin.” With the exception of the nose, the suggested similarity between these parts is suggestive. See *Leonardo Da Vinci’s Elements of the Science of Man*, by Kenneth D. Keele (2014) p. 341.

Defining what is lost in the (trans)formation from “a narcissistic ego into a fully, maturely desiring subject,” Lacan describes the *objet petit a*, the imaginary object which is the cause of desire: “The delimitation of the very ‘erogenous zones’ is [. . .] the result of a cut expressed in the anatomical mark of a margin or border—lips, ‘the enclosure of the teeth,’ the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids, even the horn-shaped aperture of the ear.” See “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink. W. W. Norton & Company, New York (2006) p. 692.

I invite readers to make interpretation this type of introition. At first, tentatively; at last, headlong, we immerse ourselves in the obliging body of the text, made receptive by a lubricating, if lubricious, mode of analysis.⁵⁵ We are accustomed to thinking of criticism as a dialogue between text and reader. I want to reintroduce the ancient erotic aspect of discourse and dialogue. To those who resist my method and think I take a singular and self-indulgent approach to these texts, I offer an Aristophanic invitation to dialogue: “Τουτῷ διαλέγου.” (“Dialogue this!” or “Fuck off.”) *Διαλέγεσθαι*, to converse with, means “to have sex,” “to fuck.”⁵⁶ My conversation with these texts, then, is the type of dialogue imagined by Strato (*Greek Anthology* XII.258) so long ago:

When someone in the future will be hearing my poetic games, he will think that the pains of love described in them are all mine. But I've always been writing this or that poem on behalf of many other lovers of boys, because this was an ability offered to me by some god.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For late classical and medieval rhetoricians, the text's *modus* was its method, its manner of proceeding. We can picture texts as having plans or schemes, but also sexual *schemata*; *modi* were erotic maneuvers or positions. Likewise, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusai* Agathon's *tropoi* refer to his sexual proclivities, also his areas of verbal and dramatic expertise.

⁵⁶ *Ecclesiazusae* 890 and *Ploutos* 1082. For both citations, see Alan H. Sommerstein's “The Anatomy of Euphemism in Aristophanic Comedy” (p. 85) in *Talking about Laughter: and Other Studies in Greek Comedy* (2009). Halperin acknowledges an erotic component in Socratic dialectic in “Plato and Erotic Reciprocity,” in *Classical Antiquity* 5:1 (1986), pp. 60-80. David Julius Jacobson visualizes solutions to the ambiguity of the phrase: the anus, finger, or dildo may be proposed as instrument of the dismissal. See *Show Business: Deixis in Fifth-Century Athenian Drama*, p. 110. See also Henderson, 155.

⁵⁷ ἢ τάχα τις μετόπισθε κλύων ἐμὰ παίγνια ταῦτα.
πάντας ἐμοὺς δόξει τοὺς ἐν ἔρωτι πόνους·
ἄλλα δὲ γῶν ἄλλοισιν ἀεὶ φιλόπαισι χαράσσω.
γράμματ', ἐπεί τις ἐμοὶ τοῦτ' ἐνέδωκε θεός.

The translation is by Andreas Fountoulakis, from his essay “On the Nature of Strato's Humour: Another Look at *Anth.Pal.* 12.6,” p. 699.

If Martial regards his poems as his alone, Strato sees communal property. Poetry is *participatio*, a partaking and a participation. Poet and reader are partners, sexual partners. The *partio*, thing shared, is also a *partio*, a bearing of (intellectual, emotional) offspring. Strato emphasizes his empathy, by suggesting the universality of these experiences, which are not his own, but shared with others, across the limits of space and time. He speaks both to them and for them, an instance of prosopopoeia where he gives voice to the absent or as-yet-unborn philoped. It is not only his facility for poetry which is god-given, but also this ability to act as surrogate or proxy. He is a different type of medium, he does not speak for the dead but for those yet to be. Strato writes of an imagined future reader who shares his erotic misfortune, suggesting that what some might see as a product of his labor alone is a joint effort. The Greek *πόνος* incorporates many meanings: labor, childbearing, pain and disease. In this paean to pain, the effort he puts into love is presented as a contrast to the play (*παίγνια*) that constitutes his poetry. The *παίγνια*, in turn, contrasts with the pangs (*πόνος*) of boy-lovers (*φιλόπαισι*), while echoing (or acknowledging) the root of play in *παισι*. There is an irony, or a melancholy, in Strato's word *παίγνιον*, for it is the name given to the trifling poems over which he labors, and the name of the erotic pets or playthings for whom he pines.⁵⁸ The pleasure is the pain in this pederastic poetic positioning.

⁵⁸ Πόνος is also intense desire. Yet Stratos takes comfort in a prophetic partnership with “others,” who are the same. Such sympathy also rests on the idea that suffering is a disease (*πόνος* ≈ *πάθος*). Πόνος is also the product of labor: the poem, itself. So if *παίγνια* = *ποίημα* (play = poem), and *πόνος* = *ποίημα* (pain = poem), then *παίγνια* = *πόνος*: play = pain.

Whatzit

Object Lessons from the *Exeter Book* Riddles

“Nature, what things there are most abject in regard
and dear in use!”

Shakespeare

First Things First

The *Exeter Book* is a curious thing. A record of deed or grant from Bishop Leofric which itemizes the books and objects he intended to donate to Exeter Cathedral and its community makes reference to “*i mycel englisc boc be gehwilcu[m] pingu[m] on leoðwisan geworht.*” (That is, A large book in English about sundry things wrought in verse.) Leofric died in 1072. The book has been at Exeter since that time, and perhaps earlier. (Leofric moved the episcopal see to Exeter in 1050.) The book may even have been produced in the Cathedral’s scriptorium. Codocological evidence suggests that it was copied out around 965–75 CE. Bernard Muir suggests that it is “perhaps the oldest surviving book of vernacular poetry from Anglo-Saxon England.”¹ Many attempts have been made to rationalize its contents, to find out (or impose) commonality on the disparate elements of this anthology.² The *Exeter Book* comprises, *inter alia*,

¹ Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*. University of Exeter Press, Exeter 2000. (vol. 1, p. 1.) All Anglo-Saxon texts in this paper are taken from this indispensable two-volume edition of the *Exeter Book*. Muir provides important commentary and background on the texts, their tradition and interpretation. Unfortunately, no translations are provided. The translations here are my own. I attempt to provide a near-gloss, so the reader interested in the original and its delights can follow them. Perhaps under the influence of the Old English, my translations are highly alliterative, as is this paper, in general. Unlike Chaucer’s Parson, I relish *rum, ram, ruff*. I beg the reader’s indulgence for the same.

² Frederick Tupper, Jr. remarks that the riddles are “certainly the most difficult text in the field of Anglo-Saxon” (*The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. vii.) Tupper, too, is an invaluable resource for the student of the riddles. Some of his conclusions have been superseded by more recent research

narratives of Christ's advent, ascension, judgment, and descent into Hell; saint's lives (*Gudlac*, *Juliana*); and homilies. In addition to these texts, the book contains passages of natural science (*Pheonix*, *Panther*, *Whale*) which can (must?) be given a religious interpretation; meditations and on the ephemerality of earthly pleasures in the *ubi sunt?* mode (*The Ruin*, *The Order of the World*, *Vainglory*); and precepts and maxims. It is also the repository of some of our finest examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry of a seemingly non-religious character, perhaps a remnant of the pre-Christian past: *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *Widsið*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. These are poems of love, loss, and isolation. Most editors conclude that there is neither rhyme nor reason to the collection. (Muir, it must be noted, argues for a "creative anthologist.") This is strange, for it strikes me that rhyme *is* the reason. What joins these pieces is not their *matter*, but their *manner*: they are all *written in verse*.³

While it might be too far to fetch to claim that the *Exeter Book* is solely a poetry manual, devised to educate a clerical community in prosody, that *may* have been ancillary to a more priestly purpose. One of the more poignant pieces in the anthology is *Deor*, that mournful meditation on one *scop*'s passing from favor—and *fashion* in literary taste. (What is *that* doing *here*?) Particularly perplexing to most students of the *Exeter Book* are the series of *Riddles*

and advances in textual recovery. He provides a thorough treatment of the text and its history, on which I rely heavily in this introduction.

³ As the donation list description should make clear, it is not the *pingum* (things) that unifies the text, but the language (*englisc*, or the version of the Saxon language imported and improved in the British Isles) and the mode of composition (*leodwisse*, that is, in the manner or way of poetry: verse-wise). *Wise* connotes wisdom, as well, or a learned occupation, and it is also one word for "thing" in Anglo-Saxon. So, in its earliest description, the *Exeter Book* is a "thing in verse." Most of the manuscript is written in the familiar Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, but a few poems demonstrate variety and even experimentation, some incorporating less insular intralinear rhyme modelled on medieval Latin lyrics—one entire piece (*The Riming Poem*) is a virtuoso performance in this mode.

(roughly ninety in number) therein. One is hard-pressed to produce likely cause for their inclusion. With rare exception, these have no obvious religious application, their subjects ranging from ultra- (or infra-) mundane objects like plow or onion, to household paraphernalia such as glass or gimlet. These, of course, would be familiar to a self-sustaining community of monks, but there is a large assortment of riddles whose solutions ought to be alien to holy hermits, objects and artifacts more germane to Anglo-Saxon warriors or the Viking marauders who periodically despoiled monasteries and missions: ship, shield, and sword. And what of those riddles which are decidedly obscene? Or those whose lewdness eludes us? Or those which combine the religious with the ribald, like the riddle in which the chalice is both object of veneration and venery? What place do *they* have in a book that also includes the Lord's Prayer?

I'd like to look at the *Riddles* of the *Exeter Book*, these things in verse in that "thing in rhyme," with an eye to disclosing their mystery. By an examination of the things described, and of their very *thing*-ness, I think we can gain a better understanding of a medieval mindset, and the place of poetry and play in that distant place-time. In the course of my examination I hope to show wherein that culture is materially different from our own (in its relationship to the wherewithal of worldly existence) and a precedent and preparation to our own, a *precursor mundi*, as it were.

These Foolish Things

The Exeter manuscript is composed of 130 folios. The *Riddles* are arranged in two places, at folios 101–11 (*Riddles 1–59*) and at the volume's close, folios 121–30 (*Riddles 61–94*). The poems are of varying length. Because not all are distinguished by a large initial, there is disagreement among modern scholars about numeration. Certain editors view seemingly separate

poems as single extended riddles, and others view neighboring narrative poems (*The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*) as types of riddle. The scribe, himself, if he was not the anthologist, may have been bewildered about where one riddle left off and another began. This has not aided in their solution. However, I will put myself on a limb, and argue that singular solution is not necessarily pertinent. At times, it seems, the object is not as important as the eye which sees it. That said, a number of poems demand “say what I am called,” which would indicate that nomination and names are *sometimes* relevant. But we must remember that *nomen* is not *noumenon*, the thing in itself, the *ding an sich*.

What are riddles? Riddles are a popular and playful challenge to creativity, perspicacity, and intuition. They were not always the playground paradoxes we associate with children today. However, they may have something to with children’s fear (or is it knowledge?) that objects *live* when we’re not looking, that is things which go bump in the night. (Or, in the case of sexual riddles, things that bump in the night.) The sense of the uncanny that the Romantics associated with *döpple-gangers*, dolls, and automata are already present in these speaking things. (Curiously mirrors, shadows, and the like are not the subjects of any of the extant Exeter riddles.) Usually they treat of an everyday object in a way that suggests it is a *saelic þing*, that is unusual, or blessed thing. (Our “silly” is derived from this word, which original connoted timeliness or opportunity.) The objects assume a self and singularity, an ego which alienates them. They become other and odd. They lose their it-ness, their *id*-ity, and attain idiocy.⁴

Sex Objects

Oft mec faeste bileac freolicu meowle,
ides on earce, hwilum up ateah
folmum sinum ond frean sealde,

⁴ In the sense of “peculiar” and “private.” In its isolation the solo becomes soul; *sael*, *sawel*.

holdum þeodne, swa hio haten waes.
Siðban me on hreþre heafod sticade,
niðban upweardne, on nearo fegde.
Gif þaes ondfengan ellen dohte,
mec fraetwedne fyllan sceolde
ruwes nathwaet. Raed hwaet ic maene.

(*Exeter Book*, Riddle 61)

A beautiful woman—a real lady—
Often kept me locked up fast in a chest.
At times she took me out with her hand,
Surrendered me to her master,
Her loving lord, just as she was told.
Then he stuck his head inside me,
Upward from underneath; it was a tight fit.
If he kept up his strength, he would fill fretful me,
With his hairy whatzit. Guess what I mean.

So runs a riddle from the *Exeter Book*. The object in question is generally acknowledged to be a *cyrtel*, that is, shirt or tunic. But, as my translation tries to make clear, an alternative sexual solution could be suggested.⁵ What is such a riddle doing in a book produced by (and for) monks? For that matter, what are *riddles* doing in this anthology, at all? As I hope to show, the riddles have both a playful and pedagogic, maybe purifying, purpose.

A number of aspects of this *cyrtel* riddle recur in others. I want to look at these issues of fastness and fixedness, secrecy and enclosure—the closet and the cloister. I’ll also be on the trail of *res* and *verbum*, knowledge and knowability, which are the bread and butter of all riddles.

⁵ In which case, one might venture the answer “*gyrdel*” (girdle, shift). This is a near homonym, which—besides referring to the feminine counterpart to this piece of apparel—also easily slips into indirect referent for the part of the anatomy which it covers: “*that* region, or zone,” as it were. (Our word *zone* derives from the Greek ζώνη, which names a similar article of clothing.) Did Anglo-Saxon have a word for the female pudendum? Our “cunt” almost certainly derives (via Middle English) from *cynd*, which is sometimes used to indicate genitalia (of either sex), but it has a more general application as well: it means kind (sort), species, origin and generation, in addition to the place of generation. These are its more common (that is, frequent) applications. The plural *cundlim* appears in the translation of the Gospel of Luke, where it means “womb.” If nothing else, that word did not have the obscene or taboo character of its current counterpart.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this riddle, immediately apparent, is the subjectivity of the object. In fact, before we are aware that the “speaker” *is* an object, a voice or identity is presented to us. About fifty of these poems (roughly half) speak in their own “person.” Yet the speaker is clearly not autonomous. Imprisonment is its natural (or, at least, normal) condition. The shirt is shifted and shuffled. It is the unwitting creature of others’ hands and heads (and hard-ons). Even its language indicates its state: it presents itself in the accusative (*mec*), it cannot grant itself real subjectivity, it is—throughout—the object of others. It is not self-possessed. Even as an object of scrutiny by the reader, it is must be seen in relation to others. And if read aloud to an audience, even its voice is not its own, for the lector personates the speaker. I am inclined to say the reader *resonates* it; he thingifies.

In this riddle the reader is confronted with a sequence of events, presented seriatim. The object-action is habitual. It is “staged.” Here, we see the “stations” of the shirt: *oft*, *hwilum*, and *siðþan* (often, at times, then or thereafter). In other poems, the *passion* of the object is even more pointed, and poignant.

It is uncertain whether the riddles were intended to be perused by a sequestered (silent?) reader or listened to communally. Perhaps, either. *Raedan* (line 9) has a variety of meanings, including (but not confined to) read, decide, decipher, explain, and guess. The *raedelle*, riddle, is something interpreted and expounded. It is also an enigma, something hidden, with the implied impulse to discover or uncover, which perhaps explains in part the sexual aspect of many of these specimens. *Raedels* implies doubt; it is debate, conjecture, and imagination. The reader hesitates while deciding and decoding the poem’s meaning. When there are two possible senses, this wavering takes on the character of *aporia*, the pleasure attendant on anticipation, on the threshold of decisive action or active decision, the sublime in the liminal.

As with all poetry, one must bear in mind homophones and near-rhymes which can nuance one's reading.⁶ To the Anglo-Saxon reader, *raed* must also conjure up wisdom, school, rule (including monastic *regula*), ornament, profit, readiness, and harness or halter, this last, perhaps, returning us to the shirt-subject.

Here the *cyrtel* is described as locked up in an *earce* (chest), so, perhaps, it is of uncommon use or value. Some readers see this chest, itself, as a symbol of the vagina. To the reader of Latin, the Old English *sinum*—in *folnum sinum*, with her hand—might suggest *sinus*, concavity, a frequent euphemism for the female sexual organs.⁷ Of course, it might also hint at the answer to the riddle: *sinus* is Latin for the bosom of a toga, or a garment in general. This riddle object is *fraetwedne* (from *fraetwan*), embroidered, adorned, hence beautiful, ornamented, or treasured. It can also be a piece of armor, with fretwork. Insofar as *fraete* means wanton or foul, a decorated/shameful chemise may doubly figure the pudenda.⁸ Then, again, *fraete* also indicates something which is covered up.⁹ The language of the entire poem is over-determined. Mirroring the chest which usually contains it, it confines (it is *nearo*, or narrow), as well. The object to be

⁶ The word might be heard to resemble *hreed*, reed, the implement with which books are written, and ready vehicle for the phallic.

⁷ For occurrences of *sinus (muliebris)* in a sexual sense see Adams, pp 90–91.

⁸ According to *Bosworth-Toller*, an Anglo-Saxon gloss of Abbo's *Bella Parisiacae Urbis* translates *fedus* (*filthy, disgusting, obscene*) as *fraete*. See Robert Stanton's *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon*, p. 33.

⁹ There is an explicit coat-of-mail riddle in the Exeter Book (no. 33). The object which is here described as invaded, may co-operate in the invasion of others. I've tried to suggest this with "surrenders" in the translation. Enslavement and subjugation are frequent (no, constant) themes in the riddles. There is a "yoke" poem, and throughout we see the appearance of slaves. Perhaps, not so surprising that—in a collection of poems in which objects are personified—we also see ample evidence of that state in which people are reified. The slave is simultaneously subjected subject and abject object.

discovered is covered with design and covers others, in turn. It hides, and it is kept hidden. Like the language encountered in riddles.

Of particular note is *nathwaet* (line 9). This word, which could be rendered as “whatnot” or “whatzit”—as in the translation—is a substantive derived from a verbal construction. Literally, it means “I know not what;” usually, it means “I cannot (or will not) say.” In the *Exeter Book* riddles, it is most often used to refer to the riddlic object, itself. As such, it is patently false, for the poser does, indeed, know what the object is (he just isn’t telling).¹⁰ It’s the *reader* who is in the dark. Here, this characteristic language indicates some *other* object within the poem, a riddle-within-the-riddle (an enigma wrapped in a conundrum?). Here the *nathwaet* whatnot is the invasive *heafod* (head) of the master, a clear figure for the penis.¹¹ The *ellen* (strength) of the *nathwaet* may suggest more than staying-power. The word means *vigor* and *vis*, and I suspect that manly semen is meant. It is not only his head that fills the hole, but his spunk. *Ellen* may also figure the phallus. It is the elder tree, which *Boswell-Toller* tells us is “a small tree whose branches are filled with a light spongy pith.” (Its wood was used to make pipes and flutes.) *Nathwaet*—the spoken designation of what remains unspoken—poses the problem of the unknowability of things, their mystery, or at the very least, the inadequacy of language to encompass or communicate it. The unsaid is the unknown; there is some kinship between the ineffable and the unspeakable.¹²

¹⁰ A variation on *nathwaet* appears as *nathwaer* (I-know-not-where), and can usually be translated as “down there,” with a knowing wink.

¹¹ I don’t know if this word had widespread use in reference to the penis. It appears often in the *Exeter Book* riddles (18, 23, 59, 63, and 77) in a sexually suggestive way.

¹² A similar association must lie behind the migration of meaning of Old English *uncuð* (unknown) into our “uncouth.”

The human actors in this poem are notably noble. The woman is *freolic*, beautiful, but also free (and freeborn). *Frean* (husband, or lord) is derived from the same root. He is also a *holdum beodne*, gracious lord (which, considering the Exeter context, may point to a spiritual meaning). One could, I suppose, read the poem as referring to the lady's rendering to the Lord what is asked (or required) when the time (or end-time) comes. The *earce* (chest), then, suggests the coffin—or maybe the *boncofa*, bone-coffin, or body—from which the soul ascends.¹³ Movement upward from below is a prominent element of the poem (although it is hard to map precisely what all the elements might mean). How does the Lord fill the soul-shirt? Or is the husband the soul, which ascends in(to) a new-created resplendent body?¹⁴ Besides the body parts named (and un-named) in the riddle, *holdum* (which certainly carries the primary meanings of loving, gracious, and free-holding) may hint at *hold*, carcass, as well. If the shirt, itself, is the soul, the poem is a parabolic paradox (*raedelle* means parable as well), because the thing in question is precisely that without which the human being is rendered lifeless, inanimate, a thing.

The Tears in Things

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht, wifum on hyhte,
neahbuendum nyt; naengum sceþþe
burgsittendra, nymþe bonan anum.

¹³ *Earce* is cognate with Latin *arca*, also box, chest, or ark this last sense reinforcing the idea of holding something holy. Something holey is suggested by *arcus*, which Paulus Festus defines as anus or buttocks (Ducange: *Apud Paulum dicitur anus, podex*). If the Anglo-Saxon reader could confuse *earce* and *ears* (arse), this would be a neat node of sexual semes.

¹⁴ One recalls the Biblical warning “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, and two cannot enter abreast.” Is the shirt’s narrowness a *type* of that scriptural stricture? If so, this mirrors the noteworthy body-and-soul riddle (no. 43). There the soul is shown to be in thrall to the body, of which it is the rightful lord or master. That riddle, in turn, echoes the longer poem (*Soul and Body II*), where at Judgment the hostile soul confronts its erstwhile host, and berates the body for yielding to (or is it offering?) temptations. The body counters with its own claims of the soul’s inadequacy as guide. How a soulless body the wherewithal to speak is certainly an enigma, but one we’re comfortable with—having read the riddles.

Staþol min is steapheah, stonde ic on bedde,
neþan ruh nathwaer. Neþeð hwilum
ful cyrtenu ceorles dohtor,
modwlone meowle, þaet heo on mec gripeð,
raeseð mec on reodne, reafad min heafod,
fegeð mec on faesten. Feleþ sona
mines gemotes, se þe mec nearwað,
wif wundenlocc. Waet bið þaet eage.

(Riddle 25)

I am a wonderful thing, a joy to woman,
Useful to her neighbors; no harm comes
To anybody, except the one who does me in.
My trunk is towering, I stand up in bed,
I am hairy underneath—in that netherland—
Sometimes, the churl’s daughter dares—
She’s so very beautiful—a lusty lady—
Grasps me, rasps me to redness,
She takes my head, fixes on me firmly.
Soon she feels the union, the curly-haired one
Who traps me. Is that eye ever wet.

Here the object stands forth or, at least, stands up. “I am,” it declares, “a wonderful thing.” One might be a little disappointed to learn that the boastful being is an onion—*cipe*, Latin *caepa*. (You thought otherwise?) As in riddle 61, the sexual sense is in one’s face. In a way, the *double entendre* is part of the method of masking in the poem, for *that* solution is easier to deduce than the other. Having hit upon “man-root,” why dig deeper to unearth “onion”? Or the more general *raedic*—radish or root, which has the poetic advantage of giving one answer with a double meaning, itself.¹⁵ I am inclined to think that many more of these poems rely on just such coincidence of word with metaphor. That is, in the sexually ambiguous riddles the poet employs another (much maligned) device: the pun. In riddles, which depend so much on the dubious and the double, it is more than apt for language to do double-duty as well. Ambiguity is the power of

¹⁵ It also evokes *raed*, which we examined earlier, and *raede*, ready. The readiness of the onion/penis is, of course, one of its most vaunted features. Preparedness and preparation are also relevant to the culinary register of the riddle.

poetry, with meanings moving in a sort of “quantum” state; we diminish their energy when we isolate or immobilize them.

The doubleness of the item in all the sexually dubious riddles may have deeper meaning. A formula familiar since the classical period declares “Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.” This is true in *physis*, but not in *poesis*. Metaphor demands that this simultaneous occupation occur, at least in *mental* space. The manipulation of matter in metaphor poses a threat. There is some danger here. Through likeness, objects are brought so near to each other that they collide, then collapse. In a way, the action of metaphor reproduces the annihilation of the thing that caused Heidegger such anxiety in face of the atomic bomb. “*Feleb sona/ mines gemotes, seo be mec nearwað.*” the object warns: “She soon feels our coming together, who constrains me.”

Examining the classical dictum about bodies in space and time, Aquinas declared that it *could* occur, through miracle. Could? It *had*. A dogmatic devotion to the virginity of Mary dictated that, at his birth, the body of the infant Christ and her hymen existed simultaneously and simullocally.¹⁶ A number of the Exeter riddles employ the locution “*on ane tide.*” This is usually translated “once,” but I think it should more properly be “at one time.” The mystery of these objects (and metaphors, generally) is not that they were *once* that, and *now* this, but they are both “at the *same* time.” Thus the reader must fathom how an object can be both male and female; living and dead; silent yet speaking.¹⁷

¹⁶ Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (Supplement to the Third Part, Q. 83 Art. 3) declares, “The Blessed Virgin gave birth to her Son by a miracle. Now in this hallowed birth it was necessary for two bodies to be together in the same place, because the body of her child when coming forth did not break through the enclosure of her virginal purity. Therefore, it is possible for two bodies to be miraculously together in the same place.”

¹⁷ Another aspect of this is explored in Riddle 46, the so-called Lot paradox. There we are told, “*Wer saet aet wine wid his wifum twa*” (A man sat down to drink with two wives). The other guests at this

The onion presents itself as a miracle, or at least a marvel—*wonderlicu wiht*. *Wiht* is an ambiguous word. Normally it refers to people, hence our “wight.” By extension, it encompasses all living beings; accordingly, it is frequently translated as “creature,” which pushes it further toward “that which is created,” animate or otherwise, that produced by God or man. Finally, it comes to mean “thing,” as in the translation. In its plural form (*witan*) it is the same as the verb “to know.” In some way, to know is to know things. This, of course, is the challenge set the reader, to demonstrate wit. I won’t venture that the original audience were reduced to tears of laughter, but the poem still educes a chuckle. This poem induces a blindness akin to that caused by the riddle-object. (Albeit one of pleasure, not pain.)¹⁸

Another aspect of the onion which is foregrounded in the poem is its *nyt* (use or usefulness). This particular *nyt wiht* attempts to unearth the nitwits in the audience. Throughout the riddles, the utility of the objects is tantamount. They are often tools. As such, they are almost always seen in relation to men. It is difficult to see the *thing, in itself*. Writing about these poems, John D. Niles says, “Riddles remind us that no object is merely an object.”¹⁹ Looking at the importance they placed on the *comitatus*, Niles argues for an

convivium are enumerated: his two daughters and his two sons; the sons of these two sisters; and each boy’s father, and the uncle of either. In total, we are told, there were *five* people at the table. At first glance, this looks like an impossibility. The contradiction is solved when we realize that the actors are occupying two places (social relationships) at once. Incest destroys supposed mutually-exclusive social relationships, so a father can be husband to his daughters, and uncle to his sons.

¹⁸ This *cipe* says “*naengum scebbe*” (I harm no one). Except his *bona*, or killer. That culprit feels it in the “eye.” That this organ is the vagina may be hinted at by the *sceþ* in *scebbe*. An alternative spelling of *sceap*, this is a sheath (Latin, *vagina*).

¹⁹ “Exeter Book Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text.” In *Anglo-Saxon England* 27, Michael Lapidge (editor), Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 1998.) p. 204.

inability of Anglo-Saxons (“a culture that prizes collectivity”) to appreciate objects in isolation.

Certain aspects of this poem will be familiar from the previous one. There is emphasis, again, on the vulnerability of the object (although it has its revenge),²⁰ and to close spaces (*nearwað*, line 10). There is spatial movement, too, with the same emphasis on the motion up from underneath. A profound awareness of the actors’ social position is evident. Here the woman, while beautiful, is of the lowest freeborn class, a churl’s daughter. And there is an ironic assertion of the object’s own “station” (*Stapol min is steapheah*; My station is high). Stasis, of course, is one of the onion’s conditions, but it is valorized as steadfastness, firmness, and readiness. The word *faeste* (or a related one) appears in many of these poems. Paradoxically, the object is fixed, but its poetical double is unstable. Here the woman “*fegeð on faesten*” (fixes firmly), with the suggestion of union, as well: *fegan* means to conjoin.²¹ It also means to fetter, so the anxiety about servitude or imprisonment is present here as before.

The poem’s denouement takes place in *paet eage*, that eye, here figuring the nether eye, the vagina. Coition is the activity implied. But there is an awful lot of attention given to the grasping action of the maiden’s hands. She *feleþ* and *nearwað*, feels and squeezes. She *gripeð*, *raeseð*, and *reafað*, before she ever *fegeð*. She grabs, attacks, and plunders the unfortunate specimen.²² Thus despoiled, it is finally inserted. Besides the meanings mentioned before, *fegan* also means to join, as in carpentry. This image is enhanced, perhaps, by the suggestion

²⁰ The onion fights against its eradication; one suffers in attempting to erase the *res*.

²¹ This word appears in the *cyrtel* riddle: “*on nearo fegde*” (he jammed it into the tight spot), where the word connotes joining, connecting and compacting.

²² The word *raesan* is also “to rush,” may conjure *raecan*, to reach, and *raescan*, to vibrate. If so the audacious girl is aquiver with eagerness and impetuosity (*raes* is also *impetus*).

of *raesn* in *raeseð* (from *raesan*). *Bosworth-Toller* glosses *raesn* as *beam* (a beam) and clarifies with the Latin *trabs* and *asser*, that is, post or stake. Likewise *reafian* may hint at *reafter*, also a beam. The eye as metaphor for the vagina (or anus) is seen everywhere, and it is clear here. “*Waet bið paet eage*” the speaker vaunts: That eye will be wet. Just because onions provoke crying, and “*waet*” suggests *waeter*, this eye needn’t be moist with watery tears. *Wæta* is many liquids: liquor; bodily fluids, like blood and urine; humors; or pustulant discharge. The word also refers to juice and sap. Its applicability to semen would seem entirely apt.

In a final miracle of metastastic metaphor, the woman with braided hair may be transformed, as well. The *wif wundenlocc* at the poem’s end is an echo of the *wunderlicu wiht* at its beginning. Or, as Patrick J. Murphy—embracing riddlic ambiguity—conjectures, the *wif* and *wiht* are one.²³

The Cavalier Clavier

Wraetlic hongað bi weres peo,
frean under sceate. Foran is þyrel.
Bið stiþ ond heard, stede hafað godne;
bonne se esne his agen hraegl
ofer cneo hefeð, wile þaet cuþe hol
mid his hangellan heafde gretan
þaet he efenlang aer oft gefylde.
(Exeter Book, Riddle 44)

A wondrous thing hangs by a man’s thigh,
Under the master’s clothes. In front it has a hole.
It is stiff and hard, it has a handy position;
When the young man heaves his habit over his knees,
He wants to touch that well-known hole

²³ He notes that both are remarkable for their hair (*ruh, locc*), no doubt pubic. Murphy notes that a tradition of onion riddles genders the root female, while (on the other hand) *wif*’s referent might be male. See “The Roots of Riddles” chapter in *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*.

He has often filled adequately before,
With the head of his hanging thing.

The solution to this riddle, in case the reader has any doubt, is *caeg*, “key.” Keys were worn at the belt and did, indeed, have a hole at the front (to engage the mechanism of the lock).²⁴ The object is described as *stib*, *heard*, and *stede*: stiff, hard, and steady (or ready; it is well-hung). *Stede* denotes a fixed location (Modern English, *stead*), with suggestions of stability and firmness (especially if associated with *stide*, firm). Related connotations are “standing” and “standing still.” If the reader conflates the word with *steda* (steed), studliness is brought to the fore. (The Anglo-Saxon word for stud is *studu*, which is alike enough to *stede* that both can be spelled *styde*.) The alliteration of *hafað*, *hefeð*, *heafde* hint at the *heft* (both thickness and weight) of the dick and its head—if like the robe it must be hove over his thigh. The riddle’s *cneo* and *beow*, knee and thigh, both have sexual applications. *Cneow* means generation,²⁵ while *beow* can be used for the male organ (as it was when translating the Genesis chapter concerning Joseph’s placing his hand under Jacob’s euphemistic *femur*).

No one has satisfactorily explained why the implement should be kept *beneath* the young man’s clothes, which would obviate its vaunted readiness and handiness. *Sceate* is seen by most readers as form of *scite*, a sheet or piece of clothing. However, it might also be derived from *sceáta*, an angle or corner, which might suggest the crotch. It means “lap” in other texts. (*Boswell-Toller* glosses it *gremium*, *sinus*. As we will see in later chapters, these are both analogs—or allologs—of the genitalia.) Of “*scete*, *scyte*,” William Skeat notes, “The orig. sense

²⁴ The Old English *þyrel* is the root of modern “thrill” and is related to the word “drill.” This hole anticipates a thrilling drilling.

²⁵ *Cneow* is also form of the verba *cunnan*, ancestor to our “know.” I suspect that it is this word that lies behind the sense of generation.

is ‘projection,’ or ‘that which shoots out.’”²⁶ The man’s clothing, then, might betray a degree of tumescence. Insofar as the word suggests “wallet” or “pouch” (as it does in *sceatcodd*), it is an apt metaphor based on both shape and location. *Sceate* also resembles *scyte*, a javelin, dart, or something that shoots. These, along with *sceatt*’s meaning of “treasure,” all point to *pintel* as answer to the poem.

And what of this male organ? Besides *pintel*, the terms which signify and dignify it are all derived from analogy or metaphor: *lim* (rod, branch); *teors* (reed—like the Latin *calamus*, used for plant, pen, and penis); *sceamu* (shame), *waepen* (weapon).²⁷ Today, I can think of no native word which is used to identify this member. One is forced to acknowledge the poverty of our language, which—although it has no paucity of euphemisms and circumlocutions—has no discrete term for *that thing* (and that thing only). Penis, of course, is a Latin borrowing, and even it is derived from metaphor: *penis* = tail. Is there any other part of the body—and one the object of such attention, anxiety, or admiration (in short, awe)—without its own name?²⁸ Here the object is referred to as *hangellan*, a hanging thing, which looks merely descriptive, but this is also actually an Anglo-Saxon substantive that means—you guessed it—dick.

The keyhole is *cub*, known—surely in the sexual sense of *cunnan*. The verb has this meaning elsewhere in the Exeter Book. In *Crist* a maiden testifies, “*Ic secge þaet ic ne conn burh gemaecscipe monnes aenges*” (I swear that I never knew any man through intercourse).

²⁶ See the entry for “Sheet” in Skeat’s *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*.

²⁷ *Hnoc* and *gadinca* are *hapax legomena* which have been glossed as *mutinus*, that is the male member.

²⁸ In the *Musa Paidika*, poems of boy-love from the Greek anthology, it is called *anonymon*, the nameless thing. In English, perhaps, *dong* is a candidate. It certainly has a native ring to it. If it has its roots in Anglo-Saxon it may be related to *dung* and *dyng*, which would be peculiar, for those words mean dung, or manure. They also mean prison (as in dungeon), which may illuminate earlier penal conditions or the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward all things earthly.

This idea of sexual unlocking is reinforced by a *gretan*, which is not only “to greet,” but to attack and touch, including erotically. Finally, the hole is *gefylde*, again. The verb *gefyllan* has a number of nuances: to fill entirely, to satisfy, to saturate, to stuff. (The idea of complete occupation of a space is complemented by the adjective *efenlang*, equally long, coextensive with, here describing the objects relation to the *hol*.) The sense of completion and accomplishment suggest sexual climax. In fact, *gefylde* has been glossed as “*consumtus, finitus*.” The word is used to translate Latin *saturo* and *impleo*; both imply insemination.

The riddle object is described as *wraetlic*, that is, curious, but also ornamental, crafted, beautiful; artistic, wondrous, rare, and *wrought*. A *wraett* is also a jewel; one thinks of the Yiddish “schmuck” which likewise meant treasure or bauble. (The word also amplifies the notion of wealth in *sceatt*.) The notion of the awe provoked by the *made* thing occurs throughout the riddles, as the *factum* transcends its origins and approaches the *perfectum*.

The Bottom of Things

Ic eom heard ond scearp, hingonges strong,
forðsipes from, frean unforcuð,
wade under wambe ond me weg sylfa
ryhtne geryme. Rinc bið on ofeste,
se mec on þyð aeftanweardne,
haeleð mid hraegle; hwilum ut tyhð
of hole hatne, hwilum eft fareð
on nearo nathwaer, nydeþ swiþe
suþerne secg. Saga hwaet ic hatte.
(Riddle 62)

I am hard and sharp, going in strong,
And firm coming out—worthy to my master.
I wander under wombs, and straightaway
Clear a way for myself. The man is hasty,
Who is behind me, a man with a cloth,
Sometimes he pulls me out of a hot hole,

Sometimes he pushes me in again,
Into the narrow I-know-not-where.
He urges me violently, that southern man.
Say what I am called.

The object in the poem is probably a poker, urging a fire. Yet the thrust of its sexual meaning cannot be resisted. The speaker is in obvious servitude to his master (*frean*, the free man of the second line), but he manages to assert some degree of self: “*ond me weg sylfa ryhtne geryme*” (And I make room for myself directly). *Res ipse loquitur*.

According to Tupper, fifty riddles have an object speak in its own voice.²⁹ Here it is unclear, at times, whether the object is an appurtenance, or an appendage, of the man. Is it the implement used in the thrusting, the recipient of that violent action, or a unwitting and unwilling accomplice? The master is shown to be the agent with *þyð*, *tyhð*, *fareð*, and *nydþ* (He presses, withdraws, proceeds, and forces). The speaker is constrained both by the man’s hands and that *nearo nathwaer* (narrow nowhere).

“[Ic] wade under wambe,” the speaker attests: I pass under the *wamb*, which means both stomach and womb. If the locus is under the *belly*, then the word signifies the vagina. If it means the female genitalia, what place is under that? The equation of the oven, forge or firepit with the female anatomy is telling, in itself. Perhaps, more so if we see any similarity to Hell. (One recalls Joe Orton’s jab at a woman’s whatzit: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!”) Of course, there is nothing in the poem that dictates that the embers be gendered female. And the action takes place in an entirely masculine context.³⁰ *Ofen* (oven or furnace) is masculine, and the hot hole

²⁹ Tupper, p. lxxxix.

³⁰ The *frean* apparently uses some sort of rag to grasp the poker and protect himself from the fire. But if this “man with a cloth” is a man *of* the cloth, then the situation may become too hot to handle. In the early in the Middle Ages homosexual activity was usually dealt with in the context of monastic reform. Peter Damian’s *Book of Gomorrah* (ca. 1048) dealt with the prevalence of this practice in the priesthood. On the surface, he argues that these reprobates should be removed

figured here could very well be the buttocks. The word *aeftanweardne* (behind, in the rear) certainly lends itself to this reading. The master is pointedly placed in back of the speaker. The coercive nature of the activity (its violence and urgency) might imply that the speaker submits under duress. Of course the whole might be a parable of man's servitude to his tool. The speaker ends by saying that he is forced by a *superne secg*, a man from the south, or down under. This confuses the issue further, because in Anglo-Saxon literature "southerners" are Welshman, whence the majority of the slave population originated. So the poker-speaker's servitude is shared by his master; both are underlings.

A similar context and treatment is provided in an earlier riddle (Riddle 37):

Ic þa wihte geseah; womb waes on hindan
þrīpum aprunten. þegen folgade,
maegenrofa man, ond micel haefde
gefēred þaet hit felde, fleah purh his eage.
Ne swylteð he symle, þonne syllan sceal
innað þam oþrum, ac him eft cymeð
bot in bosme, blaed biþ araered;
he sunu wyrceð, bið him sylfa faeder.

I saw that creature, its womb was at its back,
Mightily swollen. The thegn was behind it,
A muscular man, and so hard had he hove,
That what filled it flew through its eye.
He is not always swollen, dying he gives
What's within to others, but it comes back to him,
He gets a second wind, vitality restored;
He gives birth to a son, he is his own father.

Here, the action is observed by a voyeur, who describes the operation of a *belg*, bellows. Again, there is some confusion between the object as penis and the object as "victim" of the same. As in the prior example, the riddlic object is approached from behind ("*þegen folgade*"), in this case by

from clerical offices. (I offer a different take on Damian's diatribe in the chapter on the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, below.) Only later did the clergy begin to address this "problem" in a penitential context, vis-à-vis the laity.

a man whose musculature is either an object of dread or admiration. Let's say *awe* and cover our bases. And the anatomy of the creature is dumbfounding. Its *womb waes on hindan*, that is, most politely, its belly was at its back. But this could also mean its womb was behind it, or its sexual organ was its backside. The object ejects its contents after much exertion, and its wherewithal flies through its eye. We've seen *eage* in the onion riddle, where that word ambiguously stood for the opening of either the female or male sexual organ. It's use here may influence our reading of that poem, if it suggests that the word indicates "dick," as in our own "one-eyed snake" or—to elevate our references—the baptism of the penis as "Cyclops" in *Ulysses*. (Does this prove that Joyce was Polyphemus-ly perverse?)

The ambiguous sexuality of the poem is indicated not only by the apparent insemination of the male bellows, but by its giving birth. The birth is preceded by a death, which may suggest that this figure of the *petit mort* was used well before its recognized Renaissance occurrences. *Swylteð* (line 5) means "he dies," but many readers prefer to understand "he swells" (as a variation or corruption of *swellað*). I've hedged my bets (or embraced the ambiguity) by using both "die" and "swell" in my translation. Perhaps, "he swelters" would have been a good compromise. When one begins to allow for corruptions of this kind, other possibilities intrude. The word may be *swelhð*, "he swallows." This is apt for the bellows, which is described as taking in—what? Air, breath, seed, soul?³¹ It also expands the sexual irregularity already rampant in the riddle: we can add irrumation to pedication. Many of the other riddle-objects we encounter in the *Exeter Book* are also swallowers.

³¹ *Blaed*, the substance that causes the bellows to bulge, is a blast, a blowing, breath. *Boswell-Toller* offers *flatus*, *inspiratio*, *spiritus*, *vita*, and *animus* as possible meanings. It also registers as a benefit or blessing: *beatitudo*, *donum*, *praemium*, *beneficium*. The word's sexual significance is seen in the homophone *blaed*, fruit.

There is another reading that suggests itself. The troublesome aspect of recurring sexual tumescence (also *swellan*) is deflated by the image of another ever-renewing generator of life and spirit. The bellows gives up the ghost only to have it return to him in a sort of rebirth. Not only Christian resurrection may be figured here, but that of God-in-Christ, himself, who, as in the mystery presented by the riddle, *bið him sylfa faeder*, “is his own father.”

The Shape of Things

Ic on wincle gefraegn weaxan nathwaet,
þindan ond þunian, þecene hebban;
on paet banlease bryd grapode,
hygewlone hondum, hraegle þeahte
þrindende þing þeodnes dohtor.
(Riddle 45)

I discovered rising in a corner I know-not-what,
It swelled and stood up; it lifted up its covering;
The young girl grabbed at that boneless [thing]
With a lusty hand, and covered with a cloth
That swelling thing, the master’s daughter.

The *wundor* here is bread, at least its embryonic stage: *dah*, dough. The action of this riddle takes place in a corner (*wincel*), like a number of others. This localizing of the thing in an angle encourages the reader to associate it with the groin of the human body.

The word also resembles *wencel* (*child*), so the original audience may have been swayed by the similarity of the words to associate the object with children, a sort of “subliminal message.” Furthermore, its near-rhyme *wancol* means “unsteady,” “vacillating,” or “weak,” all apt descriptions of the sexual organ which insistently intrudes on the more wholesome solution. “Steadiness” and “fixity” are so consistently stressed in these riddles—the object in this riddle “stands,” too—but it is the *wancol*-ness of the objects and language, itself, that remains with the reader. The item is seen to

weaxan, to grow or take shape, but can one resist hearing *weax*, wax, whose chief characteristic is that it wanes.

Curiously, this object undergoes a sort of metamorphosis in the poem. The “swelling thing” in the beginning of the poem (presumably the male organ) seems to be the child growing in the gravid woman by its end. The poet collapses time in this poem as well as space.

Again, there is emphasis on covers and discovery. The object is twice draped by cloth (or clothing)—*þecene* and *hraegle þeahte* (which redoubles word—covered with a covering). This out-and-out hanky-panky underlines, I think, the covert nature of riddles, and poetry in general. The hidden meanings must be unveiled and revealed. This of course was a process much prized by the medieval mind, which sought the allegorical meanings not only of poetry, but Scripture as well, that is, *raede* and *gewritu*.³² Of course, clothing provides more than protection from the elements. For the religious reader, one can hardly forget the Biblical etiology of clothing, which was principally to cover shame (or the shameful parts, *pudenda*). Of course most men are aware since adolescence of the sometimes embarrassing inability of our habiliments to conceal an unruly member. The *regula* of many orders had to wrestle with the unwilled intrusion (and extrusion) of the lust-prone anatomy.³³ Here this seems indicated by the surprise suggested by the speaker in his “discovery,” its almost accidental nature. (Alternatively,

³² In considering allegory, they opposed *bat gastlice andgit* and *seo nacede gerecednis*, the spiritual sense and the naked text.

³³ This is contrasted to the “*hygewlone hondum*” (lusty hand) of the woman, where her willingness—eagerness—is made troublesome. *Hygewlanc* is often translated “haughty” or “proud,” but it also means lusty, or lustful. Either way, its associations with two “deadly” sins, suggests the vice-ridden nature of this woman. (A more generous translator could, of course, render the word as “high-spirited.”)

gefraegn may mean “I sought out,” hinting at the voyeuristic pleasure this riddle entails. Like the riddle object, the speaker remains hidden.) The poem nicely indicates that there was a related (but more shameful) female predicament: the disguising of unwanted pregnancy.

The poem’s activity involves hiding, and its own significance is obscure. It is the role of the reader to search things out. One recalls the biblical admonition, “For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.” Yet, presumably, for the king of heaven, even those things done in secret are not unknown. The speaker, on the other hand, once again describes the object as *nathwaet*, which admittedly does not mean that it goes unremarked, just unnamed. (This raises the question of the nomination of things, which again had its origins in Genesis, which explicitly makes this the occupation of man, God, presumably knows things not by name, but in their essence, *in se*. One imagines that Adam did not have a name for his organ, because the names project preceded the awareness of his nakedness. The object is also referred to as *ping*: *brindedde ping*, a swelling (or swell?) thing.³⁴ This slippery word is used in a number of the *Exeter Book* riddles (32, 41, 46, and 40, where it means “gathering,” like Heidegger’s *ding*).

That the object is “boneless” reminds one of another medieval riddle: What boneless thing is a woman’s chief delight? The tongue. Later, Chaucer will make much of the apparent parallels between the tongue and penis, *lingua* and *inguuen*.

The status of the young girl is uncertain here. She is a *bryd*, a young girl, certainly, and if a “bride” her sexual engagement loses its shameful. It should even be applauded, as should her industry in the pantry. (Unless she is a “bride of Christ,” which would equate her with the

³⁴ Remember, the object in Riddle 37 swells, as well.

celibate cenobites of Exeter. This looks like an early example of “the farmer’s daughter,” although her social standing seems higher: she is *peodnes dohtor*, the lord’s daughter (or is that Lord?). It is interesting to note, too, that our word “lady” is derived from the far-from-lofty *hlaefdige* (kneader of dough).

Mercedes Salvador (p. 90) notes that this riddle suggests anxiety about the fermentation process.³⁵ If so, then a similar anxiety should be evident in those riddles (quite a few) that deal with fermented beverages, especially with wine, which along with bread forms the feast of the Eucharist, after all. For example Riddle 63:

Oft ic secga seledreame sceal
faegre onþeon, þonne ic eom forð boren
glaed mid golde, þaer guman drincað.
Hwilum mec on cofan cysseð muþe
tillic esne, þaer wit tu beop,
faeðme on folm[e. fin]grum þyð,
wyrceð his willa.
fulre, þonne ic forð cyme
.....
Ne maeg ic þy miþan,
[sibþ]an on leohte
.....
swylce eac bið sona
[to]rhte getacnad, hwaet me to
[re]celeas rinc, þa unc geryde waes.

Often I triumph in the halls of men,
When I am brought forth, gladsome, gold,
There where men drink.
Sometimes in the chamber the sturdy man
Kisses me with his mouth, when we two are together,
Clasping me with the fingers of his hand,
He works his will...
More full, when I come forth
...
nor may I conceal myself,
since in the light

³⁵ “The Key to the Body: Unlocking Riddles 42–46.” In *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*. Benjamin C. Withers and Jonathan Wilcox (editors). West Virginia University Press, (Morgantown 2003) pp. 60–96.

...

So that too soon
That brightness signified
To that reckless man what was prepared for us.

The poem is seriously corrupted by damage to the manuscript. Still enough of this riddle survives to suggest its meaning (and its moral). The object here is a cup of that Anglo-Saxon favorite, mead. (If the *golde* refers to the contents of the cup and not its material.) Or perhaps wine; it bears some resemblance to Aldhelm's riddle on a *cupa vinaria* (or is it *venerea*?). If the answer is *cuppe*, the noun is gendered feminine, but the object is not necessarily “female.”³⁶ The equally likely *calic* (chalice) is masculine, and *glaes* is neuter. (This last is suggested by the importance that light seems to play in the poem, and the brightness which shines on (or through) the object to reveal what it had rather conceal. Riddle 63 is a “glass.”) No adjectives exist in the poem to give the speaker “sex.” (This may be intentional on the poet's part.) At least for the beginning of the poem there is no telling. Eventually, and paradoxically, it seems, the speaker emerges more full as a result of contact with men. Most readers, see the action as heterosexual, and this may be reinforced by a possible echo of the *Song of Songs*' “He kisses me with the kisses of his mouth.” *Hwilum mec on cofan cysseð muþe* (At times, he kisses my mouth in privy places).³⁷ The poem warns against the dangers of drink and subsequent license, and consequent culpability. In the

³⁶ The stodgy Frederick Tupper, Jr., writing in the first decade of the last century, claims, “In both poems the drinking vessel is a woman who yields readily to caresses.” *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*. Ginn and Company (Boston 1910) p. 203.

³⁷ *Cofa*, chamber, is used to translate Matthew 24.26. “[E]cce in penetralibus nolite credere,” becomes “*heonu in cofum nallað gie gelefa*” ([If anyone say] ‘Lo, He is in the secret places,’ do not believe it). Thy site of this tryst, then, is not in the open hall, but in some interior, private location. In Middle English *in penetralibus*, the phrase rendered as *on cofan* here, is translated “in pryvey chambris.”

traditional drinking-hall this might have been a possibility; women were employed as servers.

But in a cloister? I think this puts the mead in Ganymede.³⁸

Silence is Golden

Ic gefraegn for haeleþum hring endean,
torhtne butan tungan, tila þeah he hlude
stefne ne cirmde, strongum wordum.
Sinc for secgum swigende cwaed:
"Gehaele mec, helpend gaesta."
Ryne ongietan readan goldes
guman galdrorwide, gleawe beþencan
hyra haelo to gode, swa se hring gecwaed.
(Riddle 48)

I heard of a ring which sung to men,
Bright, without tongue, profitably, though it
Called with no loud din, nor strong words.
Before men, the gold in silence said:
"Heal me, helper of souls."
Understand the mystery, O men, of the red gold's
Incantation, wisely bethink
Your soul's salvation, as bespoke the ring.³⁹

The golden ring here is most probably a *huseldisc*, a paten. The Eucharistic chalice is sometimes suggested as the solution. Whatever it is, it is used in the Mass and combines the functions of communion and communication. I prefer to think of it as a monstrance, which has the advantage of suggesting both spectacle and monstrosity, making it a proper riddlic object.⁴⁰

³⁸ The phrase, “þaer wit tu beop” echoes the Vulgate’s (Matthew 18:20) “*ubi enim sunt duo*” (Where there be two). This might reinforce the cloistered character of the *cofa*, closet.

³⁹ Does my translation suggest bells? Are “The Bells” of Poe swaying me; that poem is, after all, a “sort of runic rhyme.”

⁴⁰ *Monstrum* (monster) in Latin suggests something worthy to be shown, hence *monstrare*, to display or demonstrate. Our zoos, museums and art galleries may owe something to the freak show, in which the curious and singular are exhibited. Later European collectors of such oddities would display them in a *wundekammer*. I like to think of these riddles as just such a collection of novelties; and the Exeter Book, as a kind of curio cabinet or—I can’t resist—whatnot.

It is, in fact, unclear whether the *hring* is to be considered an object of observation or attention, sight or sound. Was the Exeter community already an “image culture”? A *hring* is a gathering, too, in particular a place for spectatorship. (One recalls, too, Heidegger’s sense of *ring* as a gathering or enfolding, the “circling compliancy,” of earth and air, mortal and immortal.) Does it communicate its power through the eyes or the ears? The great mystery is that it does both.⁴¹ It is presumably etched with a religious message, hence its ability to “speak” though silent. The *Exeter Book* riddles make much of the capacity for written language to communicate. (Certain poems indicate that the Book itself was to be read in silence, suggesting that at times, anyway, it was used for private purposes.) The “mystery” of line 6 is *ryne*, whence our word “rune” for the curious characters used before the import of the Roman alphabet. As we’ve seen, the poet employs these in certain cases as clues to the riddles’ answers (or is it to taunt the audience further?), but they were by no means widely recognized and they retained some uneasy associations with the pagan past and of their use in ritual magic. Of course, the Christian communion is a magic act, too, which this riddle points to in its description of the ring’s inscription as *galdorcwide*, an incantation or charm (or, to pick up on the interest in the alphabet, a spell). One recalls that “hocus-pocus” is derived from the mystery of the Mass and the miraculous “*hoc est corpus*, “this is my body.” *Galdorcwide* also conjures up “gold,” a near rhyme. In this poem gold in turn, seems to have mystical powers, since it is described as *read*, that is, “red,” with perhaps the notion of made red by blood—here the blood of Christ. It is also

⁴¹ Mimicry is a focus of many of these riddles, where one thing seems to be something else. Hence the poems which treat the cuckoo and magpie. We are used to the opposition of sound and image, their incompatibility. We habitually oppose poetry and painting. They have their own doubles (think of Echo and Narcissus), but they do not mirror each other. Except *words*, which are both. Especially in medieval culture which often decorated the very alphabet with which they wrote. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that examination of artificiality, Wilde exclaims, “Is there anything more *real* than *words*?”

suggestive of the root *raed*. This etymon is a gold-mine in itself: it occurs, as we've seen, in the words for riddle, to read, and wisdom.⁴² Related words include: conspiracy, power, wealth, profit, to portend, to bring, deliver, to make ready, and to help. This object is auric, auricular, and oracular. (One wonders if early English monkish mind connected the Anglo-Saxon *ar* (ore) with the Latin *ara*, altar.) *Aurum* has an *aura*; the ore, an air. *Aura* initially meant breath, so it is particularly apt for this riddlic objects which live and breathe.

This riddle plays with notions of sounds and silence, the auricular and the oracular. *Runian* also means to "whisper," which is to speak silently. (*Hringan*, on the other hand, means to sound loudly, as if by bells, to *ring*.) *Hring* is anything circular, so this round runed object might be a bell, until its explicit admission of taciturnity forecloses that possibility. *Hring* also was used of money (presumably, round coins) which reinforces the anxiety that is present in the sumptuous material object which confers spiritual profit.

More is riding on this riddle than in some of the others, for its solution spells salvation (*solvere est salvere*). This spiritual benefit is indicated by *hael-* (it is repeated three times in the poem). "Hail... hail... hail," (or "Hosanna") it intones. It denotes prosperity and health, but also wholeness and—if I dare—soundness.⁴³ It also means omen, and easily transforms itself into *halig*, holy, or the sacrament or sacred things—our salvific salver?—and may have suggested the Latin *halo*, which is after all, a golden ring.)

⁴² This play on words is also repeated in our own best-known riddle: "What's black and white and red all over? A newspaper." Unlike the Exeter Book riddles, this one *must* be transmitted orally, to dupe the listener with the read/red homophone. Its variations in "red" are less riddles than exercises in the macabre, visiting hurt (sunburn, blender) upon harmless nuns and penguins. (The penguins, anyway.)

⁴³ Paradoxically, *haelan* means to castrate as well.

As a sacrificial implement the riddle object is invested with super- or preternatural power. The value of this object lies not in its material but in its use, or through some other essence conferred through consecration. It becomes a fetish object.⁴⁴ It is, of course, a measure of the decline in the power of these objects that churches are so high on the list of tourist attractions. While their appurtenances are no longer objects of awe or mystery, they are still “appreciated” for their craftsmanship, or just for the “worth” of their materials.

The *Exeter Book*’s attitude toward gold can also be seen in the following riddle:

Frod waes min fromcynn
biden in burgum, sippian baeles weard
..... wera life bewunden,
fyre gefaelsad. Nu me fah warað
eorþan broþor, se me aerest wearð
gumena to gyrne. Ic ful gearwe gemon
hwa min fromcynn fruman agette
eall of earde; ic him yfle ne mot,
ac ic haeftnyd hwilum araere
wide geond wongas. Haebbe ic wundra fela,
middangeardes maegen unlytel,
ac ic miþan sceal monna gehwylcum
degolfulne dom dyran craeftes,
siðfaet minne. Saga hwaet ic hatte.

(Riddle 83)

Old was my origin,
I lay long in cities, since the fire’s ward
...Ungirt ... the lives ...of men...
cleansed in fire. Now the foe guards me,
earth’s brother, who from the beginning
brought mankind to sorrow. I well remember
Who first forged from the earth
All my kind; I can do him no evil,

⁴⁴ Remember that our word “fetish” comes out of Portuguese *feitiço* (magic object) by way of *feiticeira* (witch). The paten has patina, certainly, but I cannot discern a sexual element to this riddle. This does not mean there is none. It just seems unlikely, since I see them everywhere. That said, the religious use of the object is no hindrance to its sexual figuration. On the contrary, as anyone familiar with metaphysical poetry can attest. See, for an Anglo-Saxon example, the riddle of the chalice (no. 63) above. “Fetish” is related, in the end, to *facio* and *factum*, the thing made.

But at times I hold others captive
The wide world over. I have many mysteries;⁴⁵
My might on earth is not little,
But I must hide from every man
The secret power of my precious art
And my extraction. Say what I am called.

As I hope my translation makes clear, the forging of objects in gold is likened to the formation of man from clay, and man is described as “earth’s brother” or “earth-brother,” which suggests their common kinship. (Is this valuation of the mineral, or minimizing of man?) Likewise *burg*, which means city, but also suggest *beorg*, hill or mound. And, in a poem which deals so insistently on the origin of gold and man in earth, it also refers to his return thither, to his *burial* mound.

Uncertainty surrounds *who*, exactly, brought mankind to sorrow. Is it the gold, itself, or the one who mines or hordes it? The *fah* (“foe”) of line four and the *fyre* (“fire”) may be intended to evoke Satan, who like gold, has his abode beneath the earth. The gold mentions that it is used to enslave men. Although one does not imagine that the Anglo-Saxons used the metal to fetter (*à la* Herodotus’ Ethiopians or More’s Utopians), the image of metaphorical “chains of gold” links this poem to others which emphasize bondage, such as the book riddle (see below).

There is stress placed in the poem on the difficulty of mining gold and of crafting it into useful (but dangerous!) items. As in other riddles, there is stress placed on the *how* of production (although here it is shrouded in mystery). It is a short step from *quomodo* to commodity. When speaking of “the work of art in the age of reproduction,” many people neglect to consider that from an early date the mechanical reproduction of natural likenesses occurred frequently, abundantly, and widely: in the minting of coins. It is, perhaps, worth pondering that our first mass-produced items were in fact currency, whose value was sometimes dictated by those who

⁴⁵ Or is it scars—*wounds*, not *wonders*?

commissioned the pieces and at times by the market in these very items. Nor are the beauty and the utility of objects equated. In fact, to the degree that costly materials or delicate workmanship discourage use, they are opposed. Art, then, perverts, turns us away from objects, or encourages us to look on them as more—or other—than utilities.⁴⁶ “Art,” of course, need not actually act upon the item in question; the mere removal from use or circulation accomplishes this. Like the “eunuch” monks, such items are de-natured.

Things to Come

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Hyse cwom gangan, | þaer he hie wisse |
| stondan in wincsele, | stop feorran to, |
| hror haegstealdmon, | hof his agen |
| hraegl hondum up, | hrand under gyrdels |
| hyre stondendre | stipes nathwaet, |
| worhte his willan; | wagedan buta. |
| þegen onnette, | waes þragum nyt |
| tillic esne, | teorode hwaepre |
| aet stunda gehwam | strong aer þon hio, |
| werig þaes weordes. | Hyre weaxan ongon |
| under gyrdelse | þaet oft gode men |
| ferðþum freogað | ond mid feo bicgað. |

Riddle 54

The young man went where he knew she was
Standing in the corner, stepped from afar,
This butch bachelor, heaved up his
Habit with his hand, and thrust under her girdle—

⁴⁶ Discussing “*le mondain*,” Voltaire wrote of “the superfluous, a very necessary thing.” One is reminded of Oscar Wilde’s *facetiae*: “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” and “We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.” One might oppose Marcus Aurelius to Wilde here: “Look beneath the surface; let not the several quality of a thing nor its worth escape thee.” (*Meditations*. vi. 3.) To which, no doubt Wilde would counter: “And beauty is a form of genius—is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great *facts* of the world . . . People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible . . .”

As she stood there—a stiff thingamajig.
He worked his will, but they both shook
The sturdy boy bestirred himself, he was at times useful,
A capable sort; then however he grew tired,
Who was stronger than she before,
Weary from that work. Beneath her girdle
Something began to grow, that often good men
Love to think on, and buy with money.

The solution to this riddle is *cyrn* (churn), *butere* (butter), or—more precisely—the process that produces it. Actions, as well as things, are the objects of our scrutiny. The mystery of the poem is increased, of course, by indirection and circumlocution regarding the implements employed in the act. Here, we see a stiff *nathwaet* used in the young man’s exertions. (Presumably, the *cyrn*’s handle.) Again, the *nathwaet* is *nyt*, although how useful is a matter of some debate. (Only *þragum* we are told, that is, at times.)⁴⁷ Here we see Anglo-Saxon performance anxiety. We recognize, too, the familiar elements of concealment: *hraegl* and *gyrdel*. Again we see the cumbersome habit. The *gyrdel* here is no doubt some generic piece of cloth used to keep the butter moist or to discourage flies or vermin while the young man rests. Of course, its much more common usage (discussed earlier) would tend to engender a sexual reading. Once more (and repeatedly) there is emphasis on standing, steadiness, and sturdiness, although all are threatened by this activity. Instability is indicated by *wagedan buta*: the participants are shaken; they lose their footing; and the earth moves.⁴⁸ The sexual meaning of the poem is diffused by its conclusion. “*Paet oft gode men ferðþum freogað*,” (That thing which good men often think about) goes some way to limit a lascivious lector, for the good man

⁴⁷ *þrag* can also mean “paroxysm.” The young man is “fitfully” useful—that is, “sometimes” and only when he comes.

⁴⁸ *Buta* (both) imbedded in the poem is perhaps a hint at its solution: *butere*.

presumably does not make sex a frequent object of his meditation.⁴⁹ *Ond mid feo bicgað*” clinches it. Clearly, the product of this work is a *commodity*. And, surely, children are not *bought*. (But what of those men and women who are, themselves, commodities—the slaves who populate the poems?)

Certain activities and artifacts described in these riddles are gendered female by certain modern readers, and, perhaps, by their medieval counterparts.⁵⁰ Bread- and butter-making, textile work, even the serving of wine were traditionally female occupations. Yet they neglect to consider that in an all-male community these chores would be taken up by men (especially as more rigid regulations were imposed). Consequently, the sex concealed in the poems is often discussed as if it were necessarily heterosexual/heteronormative. Must this be the case? In the butter-churn riddle it is; the participants are clearly described: a young man and his partner, who is *hio*, “she.”

⁴⁹ Many readers of the riddles see them as an attempt to “trap” the audience. To expose corrupt minds with “Gotcha!” and “It’s not anything sexual, at all, only a harmless.... whatever.” If one reads the riddles randily, he brands himself an “evil” man. Likewise, if one cannot produce the toothless solution.

⁵⁰ Of course, in Anglo-Saxon words, themselves, have gender. Most scholars believe that the gender of a word has no bearing on its metaphorical representation in the riddles. Masculine nouns can be figured as “he” or “she” in the poems. Likewise, feminine and neuter nouns. Still, scholars like Mercedes Salvador-Bello (2003) can declare when devising a taxonomy for the text: “Each of these compositions allude to pairs of creatures which are clearly assigned male and female roles.” (p. 63) She has in mind the bread and oven, and the book and bookcase, riddles (44/45 and 61/62), where a receptacle and the objects thrust into it are figured as female and male, respectively. Yet the body and soul are “brothers.” And “woman” is not always suggested by the language applied to the “passive” item, as happens in the churn riddle. The poker and fire, and bellows and forge, riddles are ambiguous, with the *womb* placed preposterously, at the back of a “male” recipient (is it stomach, womb, or ass?). And in one chalice riddle, the “male” chalice is the put-upon recipient of the hands and mouths of both men and women. Readers should beware of presuming that sodomitical practices are not figured. Heterosexual activity, itself, might be a metaphor for its homosexual corollary to anyone attuned to read allegorically, or to those inured to its practice. Need I mention that the Lot riddle appears here—which must be read sodomitically, of necessity?

It has been said that we don't attend to "things" until they are broken. To what extent were the inmates of Exeter "broken" men? The young man in this riddle is clearly objectified, his value is equated with the use of his tool. What if a man's tool is useless, either through accident or choice? Through his vow of chastity, the monk's mentule is an inutile man-tool. Removed from their functions, they become objects of scrutiny, contemplation, or curiosity. One wonders whether in their denial, pricks become more "present" to the priests. By acknowledging the function of the penis in micturition, the monk, perhaps, ensures that his member does not become a "thing" completely for him, that it does not command special attention, with autonomy or authority.⁵¹

Of course, the genitalia are not only used for sexual enjoyment. That the genitalia and its uses was of interest to the compiler of the *Exeter Book* is evident from the shortest surviving riddle:

This riddle confounded most modern scholars for the longest time. It was only after the runic material was understood properly that a satisfactory solution emerged. Dog was the most

⁵¹ One can make a distinction here between the “man-made object” and “man, made object.” To the extent that the monk’s body is rendered useless, is the extent to which it is already dead. And a dead body is the thing, *par excellence*. An object at once abject yet a subject of fascination. The medieval mind sometimes considered the living body as a dead encumbrance shackled to the soul. It is hard for the modern mind to accommodate this notion, except in extreme cases, wherein (like Falstaff) we can turn diseases to commodity. A familiar example of a man made object is Frank Baum’s Tin Man, whose limbs are replaced serially with simulacra, until he is entirely prosthetic.

⁵² These runes represent the letters D N L H.

frequent guess previously, based on the idea that the runes were meant to spell out DNUH, and only the scribe's unfamiliarity with the alphabet caused mis-scription. It is now conceded *hund* is not the answer, but *hland*, that is piss.⁵³ Here we get a consideration of the different anatomies, and the posture for peeing dictated by the same. Although men *can* pee sitting down. And one assumes that it would have been easier for monks to do so, rather than hoisting their habits above their haunches and exposing themselves. Of course, the habit may have underlined for the monks how near their vocation had brought them to the condition of women. Their pricks are not used for production and deposit of semen, but for the less noble occupation, which the genitals of women perform, as well.

That the *Exeter Book* considers urine is, perhaps, not so remarkable, considering its attention to the stages and changes undergone by earthly material. Wine is discussed; why not urine, its final phase? This leads me to wonder what believers in Christian dogma make of urine produced from the sacrament. Is it, too, the blood of Christ, or does it undergo further miraculous change?

Peckers

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Ic seah wyhte | wraetlice twa |
| undearnunga | ute plegan |
| haemdlaces; | hwitloc anfeng |
| wlanc under waedum, | gif þaes weordes speow, |
| faemne fyllo. | Ic on flette maeg |
| þurh runstafas | rincum secgan, |
| þam þe bec witan, | bega aetsomne |
| naman þara wihta. | þaer sceal Nyd wesan |
| twega oþer | ond se torhta aesc |
| an an linan, | Acas twegen, |
| Haegelas swa some. | Hwylc þaes hordgates |
| caegan craefte | þa clamme onleac |
| þe þa raedellan | wið rynemenn |

⁵³ Runic clues were often spelt backward, *sans* vowels. Hence, my approximation with ZZHW, for *whizz*. This also redoubles the speed suggested in the first line.

| | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| hygefaeste heold | heortan bewrigene |
| orþoncbendum? | Nu is undyrne |
| werum aet wine | hu þa wihte mid us, |
| heanmode twa, | hatne sindon. |

(Riddle 42)

I saw a couple of curious creatures,
playing openly out of doors
at fornication; the fair receiver,
horny under clothes. If the work was successful,
the female got her fill. On the floor of the hall I can
through runic symbols tell men,
those who know them from books, the names
of these united wights. There will be “need”
twice over and the bright “ash”
on one line, two “oaks,”
and two “hailstones” too.⁵⁴ With the craft of these keys
unlock the chains of the treasurechest
which the riddle from rune-men
holds fast, covering its heart
with ingenious bonds of thought. Now it is clear
to men at wine how the beasts among us,
An abject pair, are called.

This riddle considers the sexual activity of chickens. Performed openly in the yard (as acknowledged in the poem) this must have been a common sight to many. The exhibitionists are described as *wyhte wraetlice* (strange, uncanny creatures), and the poet struggles to make them so. *Wraetlice* denotes something rare or curious, usually as a result of its being ornamented, decorated, *wrought*. There is much emphasis in the poem on craft and skill, as the chickens are turned from natural beings into art. Which underlines the perversion of verse.

⁵⁴ The words used in here are the names of runes. Transliterated they would produce N, N, AE, A, A, H, and H. These can be recombined to spell *HANA* and *HAEN*, “cock” and “hen.” “Cock” still has a sexual referent. And “hen”? Was it the Anglo-Saxon name for “pussy”?

What is no secret is enigmatized—and stigmatized—by the riddle. *Undearnunga*, for example, means “openly,” yet it also contains the word for fornication or adultery (*dyrne*).⁵⁵ And *haemedlaces* is ambiguous, too. It means cohabitation, and is used sometimes of marriage, but just as often it means coition or copulation, especially of an adulterous or sinful nature. It is clear that the “play” described is very serious, indeed.⁵⁶ It is no mere metaphor; the word *plegan* meant “to fuck.” There is constant interplay between the exterior and interior in the riddle, between the in and out. By resorting to runes, the riddler suggests that he can talk about this activity, but only obscurely. (Which is of course, the point of riddles, after all.) Yet the runes, themselves, are ambivalent. Oak (*ac*, or F) is pretty straightforward, but its size and rigidity might have been suggestive (and there are two here!).⁵⁷ The ash (*aesc*, or F) is a tree noted for its hardness. Baseball bats are made from it, as well as less playful instruments: it shares its name with the word for spear or lance (often produced from that wood).⁵⁸ It is *ornus* in Latin, suitable for decorative uses. Ash, of course, is the humble (from *humus*) element of which man is made (and to which he returns): dust and ash. (Not a gratuitous, however grim, reminder in a poem which glances at the (re)production of men. *Nied* (or *nyd*) is $\ddot{\text{t}}$. We’ve seen this word before. It

⁵⁵ The concern with concealment, seen elsewhere, is present, here, too. The action takes place *ute*, (outside), and the runes are said to cover (*bewreon*) the heart of the riddle. From this we get our word “bewray,” which has come to mean to disclose or uncover.

⁵⁶ It would translate the Latin term *ludere*, which also meant *sexual* enjoyment. In the Middle Ages it was used of specifically homosexual play, a significance it retained since classical times. One wonders whether *plegan* had a similar use in Old English.

⁵⁷ It is the product of the acorn—*glans*, in Latin, used then, as now, to refer to the head of the penis.

⁵⁸ *Gladius*, likewise, had a sexual meaning, which survives (or was resurrected) in our word “swordsman.” For more on the sexual lability of Latin, see my chapters on Peter Damian and Alain de Lille.

signifies a need or urge; also business or occupation. Compulsion is also indicated, in addition to violence and pain. Finally, it's a fetter. Such a lot of meaning for so small a word. These animals are slaves to this activity. Or to the degree men are urged to it, they are animals. *Hegelas* (the rune **ᚼ**) are harder to metaphorize in this way. Hailstones occur in the Bible as divine punishment for sin, but they are, after all, pretty commonplace.⁵⁹ *Hagol* means bachelor, and forms part of the word for virginity, so their appearance in this poem is problematic. Hailstones might suggest *hael stana*, or castrated “stones,” but this is probably going too far.⁶⁰ What is certain is that the poet poses a riddle in which the runes mimic the interplay of the poultry. They are not discrete (nor discreet); coition is confusion. The runes must be separated to make sense of them. While the sexuality of the creatures (or is it its exhibitionism?)⁶¹ is a target of opprobrium, the audience must acknowledge the awesome mystery wherein two become one to produce a third.

The word *raedel* actually appears in this riddle (the only one). The ability to solve it is linked to letters and to books. As elsewhere we see the conjunction (*coniugo*, the yoking together, but also sexual coupling) of *witan* and *wihta*. Knowledge is of creatures. It is also, as must be abundantly clear, carnal knowledge. It may be a sly innuendo that the audience is said to know

⁵⁹ This is not to say they don't have some mystery about them. A number of riddles treat the transformation of water into ice. And in one poem, in particular, the element is quite dreadful and deadly: as iceberg.

⁶⁰ Holy stones, too. Which might connect them to the “relics” that appear in the *Roman de la Rose* and *Pardoner's Tale* as blasphemous euphemism for testicles.

⁶¹ The riddle may just censure the display of the “play.” Does it merely advise the activity’s occlusion, not its avoidance? Riddles, themselves, make plain the pleasure of concealment. There is even greater ambiguity. The reader is asked to see the solution *þurh runstafas*, through the runes. As in current usage, this “through” may mean “by means of” or “beneath, beyond, or behind” the letters. Language is a method of concealment and revelation, both. What is hidden is what is seen. Like later codpieces, a covering can expose what it purports to hide.

these things only from books. *Bec* is troublesome here, because it suggests backsides, and the audience becomes “those who know buttocks.” The word *bec* might tip the reader off to the riddle’s solution; it means book, but also “beak” in Latin: *beccus*.⁶² It also malignly aligns the spectator with the spectacle, which is perhaps stressed further by describing them as *þa wihte mid us* (“the creature amongst us”).⁶³ Surely, the fowl are not fucking in the refectory. Books contain the *caeg*, the key. “Key” refers to both the clues and the solution. As elsewhere there is concern with unlocking, “delivering” the answer. The creatures are “locked” together in the third line,⁶⁴ and the riddle is a *thesaurus*, a sealed treasure-chest which conceals the answer in chains and “ingenious” bondage. We recall, of course, the metaphorical use of “key” from Riddle 44. So, here, sex is both a locking and an unlocking. Woman’s treasure is to be hoarded and prized, but also prised.

The language of this poem is bound up with images of confinement and binding. The whole riddle is described as wrapped in *orþoncbendum*, devious (devilish?) bonds of thought. “Lock” appears in *haemedlaces*, *hwitloc* (white “locks” of hair), and *onleac* (“unlock”). The *hordgate*, or treasury-door, is hold fast (*hygefaeste heold*) by *clamme* (fetters). This word also refers to the bivalve, “clam.” There is an “oyster” enigma in the *Exeter Book* (no. 74). It is an appropriate object for riddles. Like the nut and its meat, it is maps easily onto the medieval conception of metaphor and allegory. Difficult to crack, once open they reveal mental aliment.

⁶² Likewise, the word *haemode*, “wretched,” in the final line, but also hen-like (*haen-mode*).

⁶³ That the men are *aet wine* may indicate their precarious state, as well. According to the riddles, wine, like gold, could enslave men.

⁶⁴ *-Lac* in *haemedlaces* (cf. wedlock) suggests “lock,” but it actually comes from *lacan*, to play, or to dance or move up-and-down, not uncommon in the games of children and adults, alike. It also means to delude (like *ludere*), which indicates the possible danger of this dance.

Food for Thought

Moððe word fraet. Me þaet þuhte
wraetlicu wyrd, þa ic þaet wundor gefraegn,
þaet se wyrm forswaalg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro, þrymfaestne cwide
ond þaes strangan stabol. Staelgiest ne waes
wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg.

(Riddle 47)

A moth ate words. I thought that
Wondrously weird, when I learned of that marvel,
That the worm somehow swallowed up the songs of men—
A thief in the darkness—their glorious speech
And sturdy foundation. The thieving guest is
No whit the wiser, though he swallows words

At first glance, this would seem to be no kind of riddle, at all. Its answer is the first word in the poem: *moððe*, that is moth, or its larva, the bookworm. I am inclined to believe the answer may therefore be the more metaphorical one. Although we are told specifically that the creature is not a man (*ne waes wihte*), we must imagine otherwise. The true subject of the riddle is not the bibliophage but the bibliophile. At any rate, the one who do not profit by his consumption of books. That the Bible, itself, may be the book in question is indicated by its description as “glorious” and man’s “steadfast foundation.” (Note, again, the importance in the riddles of steadiness (*faestne*) and strength and establishment (*strangan, stabol*).) There is a biblical echo, too, in *þeof in þystro* (“like a thief in the night”). While the *hlaef* riddle might call to mind that “man does not live by bread alone,” this one warns that inattention to the meaning of the bible is likewise unprofitable. “Words” are not enough for spiritual nourishment. In fact, the riddle performs a nifty bit of wordplay, in which words decay, not unlike the action of the bookworm itself, which incorporates what it consumes. Through each successive line, the “word” becomes the “worm”: *word, wyrd, wyrm*. Nor is it a big leap from that last to *wera*, man (in the same line).

The worm becomes the man, which is quite unbecoming. It also alludes to the eventual fate (*wyrd*) of man, when he, too, yield to the conqueror worm.⁶⁵

There is another creature which is said to “swallow” books, perhaps with sexual innuendo:

Ic wat eardfaestne anne standan,
deafne, dumban, se oft daeges swilgeð
þurh gopes hond gifrum lacum.
Hwilum on þam wicum se wonna þeign,
sweart ond saloneb, sendeð oþre
under goman him golde dyrran,
þa aepelingas oft wilniað,
cyningas ond cwene. Ic þaet cyn nu gen
nemnan ne wille, þe him to nytte swa
ond to dugþum dop þaet se dumba her,
eorp unwita, aer forswilgeð.
(Riddle 49)

I know a thing that stands earth-fast,
Deaf, dumb. By day it swallows often
The offering of a gift from the slave's hand.
Whilom in the house the swarthy thegn
Dark and dusky, puts in its mouth something dearer than gold,
That princelings, kings, and queens often desire.
Now I will not yet name this thing,
Dumb, dark, and witless, which gives up
The useful and beneficial things it swallowed before.

There is some debate about the solution to this riddle. Some suggest oven; others (myself included) opt for bookcase.⁶⁶ Like the moth, it does not benefit from its proximity to books. It is *unwita*, unwise, but also, thereby, an un-thing. Unlike other riddlic objects, this one is deprived of voice, altogether. Its silence (it is twice called “*dumba*”) may be linked to servitude. It is

⁶⁵ Foucault believed that things tended word-ward. Perhaps, this is a more accurate depiction of the progress of things.

⁶⁶ If this riddle operates as I believe others do, the word *daeges* (translated here as daily, or by day) may indicate that oven was meant. *Daege* also means bread-maker.

certainly surrounded by “slaves,” and may partake of their condition.⁶⁷ Slaves in traditional usage were considered a type of “dead” man, or living “thing.”

Again the poet uses circumlocution, saying he will not (nor cannot) name this thing: *Ic þaet cyn nu gen nemnan ne wille*. There may be *double* (or *treble*) *entendre*, here. *Cyn* means, as we’ve seen, “kind” or “thing.” It also denotes “offspring,” “sex” or “gender,” or “genitalia.” And as the word for cleft or crack, it might indicate which sex is indicated (although it might indicate an unorthodox sexual orifice). *Cenning*, which echoes *cyning* (“king”) in the previous line, means “fucking.” It also means “kenning,” which are a principle attribute of the Anglo-Saxon language, and probably enabled them to better understand and construct poetic metaphor. (They are compound word-forms which are used to describe objects: like *waelweg* (whale-way) for “sea.”) *Wille*, from its similarity to *wielle*, might suggest either sexual organ, for that word means both well and fountain. (I wonder whether *wille* had already acquired its eventual meaning of “prick,” which was, after all, an offshoot of “will,” or desire.) Riddle 79, perhaps the shortest, proposes, (*in toto*): “*Ic eom aepelinges aeht ond willa*” (I am a man’s wealth and will). Is this the etheling’s dingaling?

That the inmates of Exeter would concern themselves with books is no surprise. A number of the *Exeter Book* riddles are preoccupied with them and their production. (There was a scriptorium at Exeter.) Like the butter of Riddle 54, the contents of this one are the objects of

⁶⁷ The question becomes, would a slave have been handling books? Even to reshelf them? Could an illiterate perform that function? The servant is described as a *thegn*, which is definitely *not* a slave, but he is also described as *sweart ond saloneb* and *eorp* (“black and dark-complexioned” and “dusky”). This is the typical way that Anglo-Saxon describes the Welsh, who comprised the largest part of their slave population. (So much so, that the word *wale*, originally used to indicate that tribe, came to mean “slave.” This has caused some critics to struggle over when the word means which. There seems to be no anxiety surrounding our word *slave*, which likewise had its origin in the designation of a captive population: the Slavs.) The blackness could, of course, be explained by their involvement with the oven used for baking.

desire, and are said to be more valuable than gold. In a way, this might suggest that they are saleable, to be bought. This could be true of bread, at least in cities. Were books in that category of commodity yet? Certainly, the scriptorium was a sort of factory or assembly-line, efficiently turning out (relatively) large numbers of books, which take on an artisanal or crafted character. Still, by their nature and their materials, books remained a kind of luxury item, enjoyable and affordable to few.

Ic seah wraetlice wuhte feower
samed sibian; swearte waeran lastas,
swaþu swiþe blacu. Swift waes on fore,
fuglum framra; fleag on lyfte,
deaf under yþe. Dreag unstille
winnende wiga se him wegas taecnep
ofer faeted gold feower eallum.

(Riddle 51)

I saw four wonderful creatures
Travelling together, their tracks were black,
Their footprints dark, indeed. In the past,
As bird-girders they were swift, they flew aloft,
Ducked or dove under water. Now, slowly,
without rest works our warrior, laboriously,
who traces the way for all four, all for the gold leaf.

The intense and slow labor of manuscript is treated in this riddle. The four creatures are the pen, itself, and the three fingers used to hold it. The pen is formed from the feathers of birds (Never named, but “swift,” and “dove” are literal translations of the adjective *swift* and the verb form *deaf*. I could not resist “ducked,” which occurs nowhere in the poem.) The poet uses a bit of sleight-of-hand in deluding the reader: repeated images of walking and feet (and their vestiges) distract the reader from the real answer, which is, after all, the hand. The exertion of this worker is almost as strenuous as that of the operator of the bellows at the forge. He is a “drudge.” (Although there is no sexual satisfaction here). His work is, however, not

unappreciated. The poem begins and ends with references to the “artistic” quality of the work: *wreatlic* and *faeted*.

Another “pen” poem appears as Riddle 61:

Ic waes be sonde, saewealle neah,
aet merefarope, minum gewunade
frumstaþole faest; fea aenig waes
monna cynnes, þaet minne þaer
on anaede eard beheolde,
ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
lagufaeðme beleolc. Lyt ic wende
þaet ic aer ɔþpe sið aefre sceolde
ofer meodubence muðleas sprecan,
wordum wrixlan. þaet is wundres dael,
on sefan searolic þam þe swylc ne conn,
hu mec seaxes ord ond seo swiþre hond,
eorles ingeþonc ond ord somod,
þingum geþydan, þaet ic wiþ þe sceolde
for unc anum twam aerendspraece
abeodan bealdlice, swa hit beorna ma
uncre wordcwidas widdor ne maenden.

I stood on the sand, near the seawall,
By the seaside, I was held fast
In my original dwelling. Few were any
Of the men who beheld my solitude in that land,
Or how at dawn the dark waves
Locked me in a watery embrace. Little did I know
That I ever would (before or after)
Speak—mouthless—o’er the meadbenches,
Wrangling words. This is really wonderful,
To those who cannot understand such a thing,
How a work of art communicates to minds,
How the tool’s point and a skilled hand,
A man’s artistry and the point together,
Relate things; that I should speak to you,
Both of us together, my message,
Announce it boldly, yet most men,
In the wider world would not understand.

The speaker here, which nonetheless proclaims its voicelessness, is a reed-pen. As in the previous poem, it places stress on the cooperation of scribe and pen, although they are not a

single creature here. Like the “paten” riddle, this speaker is mouthless, which by now should indicate to the reader that written language is involved. Both poems ponder the elite nature of literacy and applaud the audience for its election. Like the previous poem, the speaker dwells on its prior condition; here, its isolation takes on an almost elegiac quality, not unlike the *Wanderer* and *Seafarer* poems in the *Exeter Book*. Or *The Husband’s Message*, which follows this riddle, and some see as a continuation of it. (It concerns the conveying of a secret message via rune-staffs.) One recalls that the “*aenlic winc*” is the lonely man; the single, but also singular. And “beautiful.” Like the *wraetlic wiht*.

As in many of the riddles, there is attention paid to the various stages in the life of a thing. Often this moves from the animate to the inanimate, and from the voiceless to the vocal, as when an animal’s horn becomes, say, a trumpet or a vessel for ink (Riddles 12, 84 and 89). In this the poet (and his culture) differs from us (and ours). The life of a things was not its decay, but its use.⁶⁸ In this, perhaps, we are at a disadvantage to the medieval *vis-à-vis* things. Their artefacts were often produced from formerly living beings. And they often assisted in their manufacture. What connection can we have to synthetic things, whose production is performed elsewhere, sometimes not by living hands? Their lives are not ours. Throughout the Exeter riddles there is emphasis placed on transition (and on the transitory). All things are in the process of becoming something else, or have that potential. Or, like the fetish, are put to an alternate use. Swords are beat into ploughshares, and even a marauding warrior can become a *miles christi*.

Last Things

Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede,
woruldstrengā binom, waette siþhan,

⁶⁸ Francis Ponge tries to capture this, I think, with his “Soap.” There, the “voice” of the *savonete* is the foam produced in its use. And when *that* is exhausted, it grows silent, and dies.

dyfde on waetre, dyde eft þonan,
sette on sunnan, þær ic swiþe beleas
herum þam þe ic haefde. Heard mec siþþan
snað seaxses ecg, sindrum begrunden;
fingras feoldan, ond mec fugles wyn
geond speddropum spyrede geneahhe,
ofer brunne brerd, beamtelge swealg,
streames daele, stop eft on mec,
siþade swearlast. Mec siþþan wrah
haeleð hleobordum, hyde beþenede,
gierede mec mid golde; forþon me gliwedon
wraetlic weorc smiþa, wire bifongen.
Nu þa gereno ond se reada telg
ond þa wuldorgesteald wide maere
dryhtfolca helm, nales dol wite.
Gif min bearn wera brucan willað,
hy beoð þy gesundran ond þy sigefaestran,
heortum þy hwaetran ond þy hygebliþran,
ferþe þy frodran, habbaþ freonda þy ma,
swaesra ond gesibbra, soþra ond godra,
tilra ond getreowra, þa hyra tyr ond ead
estum ycað ond hy arstafum
lissum bielecgæð ond hi lufan faeþmum
faeste clyppað. Frige hwaet ic hatte,
niþum to nyttre. Nama min is maere,
haeleþum gifre ond halig sylf.

(Riddle 26)

A life-thief stole my world-strength,
Ripped off flesh and left me skin,
Dipped me in water and drew me out,
Stretched me bare in the tight sun,
The hard blade, clean steel, cut,
Scraped—fingers folded, shaped me.
Now the bird's once wind-swift joy
Darts often to the horn's dark rim,
Sucks wood-stain, steps back again—
With a quick scratch of power, tracks
Black on my body, points trails.
Shield boards clothe me and stretched hide,
A skin laced with gold. The bright song
Of smiths glistens on me in filigree tones.
Now decorative gold and crimson dye,
Cloisonné jewels and a coat of glory
Proclaim the world's protector far and wide—
Let no fool fault these treasured claims.

If the children of men make use of me,
They will be safer and surer of heaven,
Bolder in heart, more blessed in mind,
Wiser in soul; they will find friends,
Companions and kinsmen, more loyal and true,
Nobler and better, brought to new faith—
So men shall know grace, honor, glory,
Fortune, and the kind clasp of friends.
Say who I am—glorious, useful to men,
Holy and helpful from beginning to end.⁶⁹

This is one of many “book” riddles in the Exeter manuscript.⁷⁰ Like the controversial “wanfeax wale” riddle (is it a leather bottle, or dildo?), this follows the creature’s career from living animal to implement for man’s use and pleasure. Like that other object (whatever it is), this one begins life as some type of cattle. It is slaughtered, skinned, and prepared as parchment. The poet almost delights in the torture of this animal; he presents a graphic and painful progress. This is a poetic *passion*, perhaps more pointed if the beast is a lamb (for vellum) and the eventual book the Bible. Unlike that poem, the object’s hide is not bound to bind men but to free them. Though the “binding” of the book is dealt with here.

This poem (somewhere it almost ceases to be a riddle) manages to both speed up time, and to stop it, dead. It is both cinematic and static; at times, theater; at others, portrait. (Why do we call still-life what the French call *nature morte*?) It simultaneously collapses time and space, so we see all its phases at once. Almost flattened, cubistic. Is this odd, considering perspective had not been “invented,” and different periods of a saint’s life, say, could be depicted on a single

⁶⁹ This translation taken from Craig Williamson’s *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs*. The University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1982. p. 84.

⁷⁰ The others are 65, 88, and 91. There may have been more, now lost, and a few of the uncertain riddles might be solved as “book.” This solution, or “dream” or “poetry,” is like “creation,” in that it can accommodate a lot of conflicting material. One author supplies the answer “phallus” whenever stumped.

canvas? And, like *Juliana* or *Gudlac*, this is a matyrology, with similar language. In fact it comes very close to the most famous Anglo-Saxon “object” poem: *The Dream of the Rood*.

There another miraculous being finds voice to proclaim its benefit to mankind, though it suffered like (and with) Christ. The rood’s “ic am” becomes the great “I am” of God.

This single riddle combines many of the objects found in the others: there is the feather-pen and the dark traces of the ink; the ink-well made from its fellow’s horn (maybe its own); shields converted to more peaceful use as book-covers; the fire, the forge, and the hammered metal. Nor does it neglect to mention its covering; the hide which hides; the ornate nature of the binding, covered with jewels and worked in gold. And its value, which resides less in its material than in its usefulness to me. And therein lays the final miracle, an even greater transformation; by virtue of this book-beast man is made new. The language used (“bolder,” “loyal,” “true”) is that of poetry of the pagan past, but adapted for new use here, converted, as it were. A new community is formed, more lasting than the old, and the *faest*-ness which was sometimes troubling previously (as trap and servitude) is a source of safety, a foundation. Fealty and affiliation gives way to fidelity and the “*filius dei*.” Man is not sundered but made whole; and surrender ends in holiness.

Uncertain Signs

Longing and Language in the *Liber Gomorrhianus*

Around 1051 Peter Damian wrote a lengthy letter on the “problem” of same-sex behavior among cloistered clergy. This *Book of Gomorrah* is considered a foundational text for Christian intolerance of homosexuality. It creates a taxonomy of transgression and punishment. Chief among the latter: excommunication, which threatened the sinner with exclusion from one group, even as it formulated his inclusion in another. Here the homosexual becomes a member of a class whose very designation marks the sinner as the citizen of a transnational nation: *Sodom*. The “sodomite” becomes both subject and subjectivity.

In his polemic Letter 31, the so-called *Liber Gomorrhianus*, Peter Damian identifies the sexual dangers of single-sex communities.¹ Some critics question the origins (and *bona fides*) of Damian’s anti-sodomitical preoccupation. Most fall back on an easy psychological diagnosis of unconscious and repressed homoerotic attraction. Michael Goodich proposes “a personal experience of traumatic impact” to explain Damian’s aversion. And James Neill sees Damian as

¹ The recognition of sexual abuse of minors as a problem was recognized in the emergent church. Note that these were not proscriptions on adult same-sex unions. (Although how these might be accommodated by a doctrine which demonizes extramarital sex is still a dilemma.) Samuel Laeuchli proposes a political dimension behind this, as the church hierarchy attempted to distinguish itself from the sexual practices of the crumbling Roman Empire. The *Didache* (ca. 120 CE) advises, “Thou shalt not seduce young boys.” And in 309 CE the Council of Elvira, the earliest synod for which we have records, imposed strict punishment (excommunication even until death) on those who sexually abuse boys. (Canon 71: *Stupratoribus puerorum nec in finem dandam esse communionem.*) See *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (1972) by Samuel Laeuchli and *Sex, Priests, and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis* (1995) by A. W. Richard Sipe.

“seriously disturbed.”² Relying on a study of the relation of homophobia and same-sex attraction by Henry Adams, Neill suggests that “Peter’s very high level of hostility to homosexuality would correlate to a very high level of homosexual responsiveness.” And in an examination of the “crisis of masculinity” caused by calls to celibacy in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Megan McLaughlin questions Damian’s conflicted attitudes towards paternity: “[D]oes it simply reflect the peculiarities of his personal psychological makeup, rooted in his childhood trauma?”³ Some, in pointing out the persistence of the problem, find an unlikely ally in Damian, who points a finger at traditions (and innovations) within the Church as causes for (or incitements to) sin. While we still shudder at the reverberations from the calamitous clamor of Damian’s voice, I think much can be gained if we turn to his words, themselves. I’d like to re-read the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, to discover the far from unalloyed sermon against sodomy that many see (or assume).

Liberating the *Liber Gomorrhianus*

Concerning the rhetoric of cunning friars—the lines occur when Male Bouche considers Faus Semblant—Jean de Meun warns, “*Tous jors i troverés sophime/ Qui la consequence envenime, / Si vous avés la sottilité/ D’entendre la duplicité*” (ll.12143–46). That is: “You will always find

² Michael Goodich, *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period*, Dorset Press, 1979, p. 19. And James Neil, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies*, McFarland, 2009, p. 366.

³ “Secular and Spiritual Fatherhood in the Eleventh Century” in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, edited by Jacqueline Murray. London: Taylor & Francis (1999) p. 27. All these authors build on the psychological portrait in Lester Little’s “The Personal Development of Peter Damian,” in *Order and Innovation in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Joseph R. Strayer*, ed. William C. Jordan et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) pp 317–41.

the sophistry which poisons argument there, if you have the subtlety to understand the duplicity.”⁴ We should address brother Damian’s text with the same attention. In my approach to Damian’s seminal text,⁵ I look at both its *matter* and *manner*, to question a monochromatic assessment of the work. I believe that the receptive reader can discern something of the author’s ambiguous attitude toward his topic both in *what* he says and the *way* in which it is said.

⁴ Or, as Chaucer has it:

For menne maye fynde alwaye sopheme
The consequence to enueneme,
Whoso that hath the subtelte
The double sentence for to se. (7469–72)

In a medieval “Orisoun to God” the supplicant asks to be made freed from verbal duplicity:

Sop wiþouten falshed
Or eny oþur doublehed
Of fikel word wiþ double entente
To bleenden þat þe sawe mente

Truth without falsehood
Or any other ambiguity
Of deceitful word with double intent
To obscure what the sentence meant

(See Frank Allen Patterson’s *The Middle English Penitential Lyric: a Study and Collection of Early Religious Verse*, p. 124.)

⁵ Two editions of the *Liber Gomorrhianus* exist in English. Both are excellent translations of this text, which is so often ignored or dismissed. See Pierre J. Payer’s *Book of Gomorrah: An eleventh century treatise against clerical homosexual practice*. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982.) A more recent translation appears as Letter 31 in Owen J. Blum’s *Peter Damian, Letters 31-60* (in the Fathers of the Church Fathers of the Church–Medieval Continuation series from the Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1990). Both translators opt for a straightforward translation of Damian’s Latin. Occasionally, they communicate the comic incongruity of the text. The Latin text can be found in Damian’s *Opera Omnia*, in volume 145 of *Patrologia Latina*, J.P. Migne, ed. (Vives: Paris 1874).

By design or default, Damian's text abounds in dubious turns of phrase.⁶ Umberto Eco suggests *penuria nominum* as a source of *translatio equivoca*, that a limited number of words might produce imprecision or ambiguity—liabilities in philosophy, necessities in theology. I'd like to unsettle the sense that we are impoverished by a circumscribed vocabulary. Instead, we should adapt Narcissus' “*In opem me copia fecit*” (Plenty makes me poor) and proclaim “*Inopia me percopiosum fecit*” (Lack makes me magniloquent). My close reading will demonstrate the *poetic* bent of the jeremiad, which embraces ambiguity, allowing for a scurrilous reading of what is so often seen as a puritanical text. This amounts to a type of code-switching, without a change in diction, that we see in other outsider groups with double consciousness. An examination of Damian's vocabulary, and a reconstruction of the metaphoric and exegetical nimbus in which he works, reveals a text that is precisely what it seems not to be.⁷ The text

⁶ In a discussion of *langage poetique*, where he contrasts “Gongorine” texts with “French clarity,” Barthes considers the *play* allowed (encouraged!) by convoluted and obscure texts: “However, once the alternative is refused (once the paradigm is scrambled), utopia begins: meaning and sex become the objects of free play, in the midst of which (polysemic) forms and (sensual) practices, freed from the binary prison, will reach a state of infinite expansion. In this way there can be born a Gongorine text and a happy sexuality.” Barthes (Actif/passif’ p.137), quoted by Paul Julien Smith in “Barthes, Góngora, and Nonsense” (*PMLA*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Jan. 1986) p. 83. “Polysemy” he writes elsewhere, “poses a question of meaning, and this question always comes through as a dysfunction[.] . . . Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such ways as to counter the terror of uncertain signs[.]” “Rhetoric of the Image” p. 39. In this examination of the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, I want the reader to confront what Lacan calls “the challenge to meaning posed by the most Gongorine conceit and the nonsense of the most outrageous pun” (again, in Paul Julian Smith, p 83).

⁷ Damian foregrounds doubt and ambiguity in his letter to Pope Leo, where he claims that his work is meant to address any doubt (*uspiam dubitationis*) that might arise about the business and to clarify the darkness of ambiguity (*ambiguitatum tenebris*). In his response, the letter's recipient, Leo IX, remarks on the dubiety and doubleness of churchmen: “*tales nimirum clerici etsi non verborum, tamen operum testimonio profitentur, quia non existunt, quod censemur*” (Such clerics, indeed, profess, if not in words, at least by the evidence of their actions, that they are not what they are thought to be.) This indirect accusation may have put Damian in his place, but I do not want to pursue the easy charge of hypocrisy. Damian adopts a more problematic posture on the relation of language to truth. This is not a simple case of dishonesty, but a complex demonstration of duplicity, an amplex of ambiguity. That is, a doubleness that does not intend to deceive or disguise, but to reveal a simultaneity of semantic import.

can be read against the grain, to reveal a playful writer.⁸ This is less a *cri de coeur* than a *jeu d'esprit*.⁹

What *is* the game that Damian plays? And who are his teammates? And can we imagine a playing field that spans geographic, linguistic, and temporal limits? If the *Liber Gomorrhianus* is the first volley in this lewed and learned *ludus*, who returns the serve or (to mix metaphors slightly) picks up the ball and runs with it? Damian's letter got a lukewarm reception initially, but eventually it was embraced by any number of severe writers on sexual morality.¹⁰ We know—and live—the consequences of this adoption.

⁸ Or a severely troubled one. This view is most cogently presented by Lester K. Little in “The Personal Development of Peter Damian” in *Order and Innovation in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Joseph R. Strayer* (Princeton 1976), pp. 317–341. Little argues for a psychological understanding of Peter’s attitudes toward money, sex, and flagellation in his childhood experience of poverty, orphanhood, and abuse. I would like to suggest Peter’s more nuanced and conscious appreciation of the problem of same-sex desire and its expression—whether physical or in writing.

For example, in Letter 57 he recalls his reprimand to a bishop apprehended playing chess (!): “*Librata manu virga exero, plagas infigere quaero si sit qui terga subjiciat*” (With brandishing hand, I proffer the rod; if any will offer his back, I will inflict the blows.) This tepid translation is equivocal enough to suggest the sexuality latent in the Latin. But consider the charge that inheres in *libro*, *virga*, *exero*, *infigo*, *terga*, and *subicio*: My hand swinging, I thrust (or uncover) my cock; I desire to thrust in (infix) the strokes, if any will submit his backside. Here Damian conflates the two topics for which he is most remembered: penitential flagellation and sodomy. Rather than suggest that Peter was unaware of his troubled relation to the issue and gave unconscious expression to his repressed desire, it behooves us to recognize how he wrestles with sodomy as a personal and institutional problem.

⁹ Anticipating my approach, David Lorenzo Boyd (“Disrupting the Norm,” p. 63) writes that “scholars have ignored the way that Damian’s work can be used as a means of understanding perhaps even deconstructing homophobia itself.” He also suggests that the “threat of disruption constantly surfaces in Damian’s diatribe, creating a vast network of images, ideas, and illustrations indicating the shattering effect that same-sex sexual activity could have on a heteronormative medieval cultural order and its practices (including interpretive ones).”

¹⁰ If Pope Leo resisted Damian’s appeal, he was not impervious to his paronomasia. He shows a peculiar propensity to follow Damian’s lead. His own diction is ambiguous. So much so, that (in at least one notable instance) some modern readers refuse to accept the Pope’s response at face value. When he evaluates the blameworthiness of Damian’s targets, Leo elaborates:

[E]los, qui vel propriis manibus, vel invicem inter se egerunt semen, vel etiam qui inter femora profuderunt, et non longo usu, nec cum pluribus, si voluptatem refrenaverint, et digna poenitudine probrosa commissa luerint, admitti ad eosdem gradus, in quibus in scelere manentes, non permanentes fuerant,

What has gone unremarked is the influence it may have had on such readers as Alain de Lille, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean de Meun, (and their imitators), who flirt with sexual irregularity under cover of propriety, in similar ways (sometimes, in the same way).

divinae miserationi confisi, volumus, atque etiam jubemus; ablata aliis spe recuperationis sui ordinis, qui vel per longa tempora secum, sive cum aliis vel cum pluribus, brevi licet tempore, quolibet duorum foeditatis genere, quae descripseras maculati: vel, quod est horrendum dictu et auditu, in terga prolapsi sunt.

We wish and enjoin that those who by their own hands, or with another, brought forth semen, or even those who poured it out inter-femorally—if not by long-standing habit, nor with many partners—if they have restrained their desire, and have purged themselves of sordid sins with condign penance, be admitted to the same rank which they held while sinning (yet they may not persist in them), confident in divine mercy. However, there is no hope of recovering their position for those who are befouled by those two types of filthiness, which you have described, that is, alone (for a long time) or with others or even many (howsoever briefly), or—what is horrible to say as well as to hear—*have slipped into the ass.*

John Boswell rejected any double-entendre here. In a footnote to the final clause, which he translates, “who have fallen into the last category,” he allows, “Or, ‘who have moved on to the rear’—a more literal reading of the words *in terga prolapsi sunt*—but this seems inconsistent with the euphemistic terminology which otherwise characterizes the epistle.” (Boswell *Intolerance*, 366) Yet, considering that Damian’s final category of *sodomia* (after masturbation, mutual masturbation, and interfemoral sex) is anal intercourse, *terga*, as backside, is *a propos*. This is the term used by Damian, himself, when he devises his taxonomy: “*alii siquidem semetipsos polluunt, alii sibi invicem inter semanibus virilia contrectantes inquinantur, alii inter femora, alii fornicantur in terga.*” (Some pollute themselves; some befoul each other manually by mutually fondling their cocks; some fuck between the thighs; and others, in the ass). Yes, the word is crude; all the more reason to applaud Leo’s smuggling of the obscenity here. What’s more, in coupling it with *prolapsi*, Leo introduces greater ambiguity, still. *Prolabor* may have negative valence (as “to fail,” “to err,” to come to ruin,” and in ecclesiastic Latin “to fall from grace), but it also means “to glide forward,” “to slip or slide” or “to go further.” (A sense which is re-enforced if we allow slippage with *praelabor*, with the sense of “to flow.”) In this context, the word is positively lubricious.

If my reading of the text holds, one is forced to ask whether Leo appreciated the ambiguity of the *Liber*. His commendation of Damian’s decorous prose (*honesto quidem stylo*) may, in fact, be an ironic acknowledgement of its suspect decoration (and duplicity)—virtuosity masquerading as virtue. Leo notes elsewhere that he must interpose his apostolic authority lest any “scrupulous uncertainty” arise among the letter’s readers: “*Oportet, sicut desideras, apostolicam nostram interponamus auctoritatem, quatenus scrupulosam legentibus auferamus dubietatem.*” It is precisely this *dubietas*, doubt and doubleness, that I want to pursue.

A Word to the Wise

Peter Damian, himself, recognized his sinful linguistic playfulness. (And it *was* considered sin.

For example, in the *Pedagogus*, Clement of Alexandria assails *aischrologia*, foul speech. He also makes a maneuver that is familiar in the future discourse of sodomy: the sin, itself, is to be unnamed: “As becomes saints, let obscenity or foolish talk or scurrility not even be named among you.”)¹¹ In Letter 57 Damian confesses:

¹¹ Clement makes one of the earliest and strongest associations of inordinate language with sexual irregularity (and with pederasty, in particular). This trope (the erotics of rhetoric) will persist throughout the middle ages.

For the same reason, our Educator has proscribed the too free use of certain terms, meaning to eliminate too free contact with immorality. Lack of restraint in the words we use gives rise to habitual disorderliness in actions, while to take pains to be discreet in our language is to control licentiousness [. . .] In the same way, writings that treat of evil deeds must be considered indecent talk, such as the description of adultery or pederasty or similar things. (*Paedagogus*, 2.6.52)

Clement equates verbosity and perversity: “In the multitude of words,’ it is written, ‘there shall not want sin.’” Loquacity, the abundance of language, verbal facility and fecundity are markers of the effeminate, the sexually suspect, like Gongora and Llyl or Firbank and Rolfe. Guillaume Peyraut’s *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* offers a thoroughgoing review of these sins. This section of his work represents the metamorphosis of the handbook of rhetoric into the manual of penance.

Alanus in his *Summa de arte Praedicatoria* (On Preaching) advises:

Si quis a verbositate et effrenata linguae evagatione cavere studet, attendat [quod] ait Apostolus: Ineptas et viles fabulas devita. Hieronymus ait: “Scurrilitas atque lascivia, te praesente, non habeat locum.” Omne quod non aedificat audientes in periculum vertitur audientium; Corrumptum enim bonos colloquia prava.

He who strives to guard against verbosity and the wandering of an unreined tongue will pay heed to what the Apostle says: “Shun improper speech and old-women’s fables.” And Jerome adds, “When you are present scurrility and lascivious language have no place.” All that does not edify its audience is turned to the hearers’ peril. Even the good are corrupted by depraved colloquy.

Alanus mistakes the final warning. The first letter to Timothy (15:33) actually admonishes, “*Nolite seduci corrumptum mores bonos colloquia mala*” (Do not be seduced; evil correspondence corrupts good manners). By omitting *mores* and changing *mala* to *prava*, Alanus

Nam ut me solum digne coarguam, videtis ipsi, quia, protinus ut ad vos venio, ecce sales, ecce facecia, lepores, urbanitates, dicacitates, volumina questionum omnes que verborum inanium pestes insolenter erumpunt, quae nos, non iam sacerdotes sed potius oratores ac rhetores, sive, quod in honestum est, scurras ostendunt.

And speaking only for myself, you must have noticed that as soon as I visit you, there are at once witticisms, jokes, pleasantries, humorous remarks, banter, and a host of questions; a whole plague of useless words breaks loose which show that we act not as priests but rather as orators and rhetors, or, which is worse, as clowns. (Blum 57.29)

Note Peter's pleonastic plasticity. His enumeration of the variety of verbal vices shows him victim of this very *virus*.¹² In this profuse stream of words, I detect a decided sexual undercurrent. Consider the words *sales* (sarcasm, with a hint at its "salty" character, which is near enough to *salax* to suggest the salacious nature of the conversation) and *lepores* (from *lepor*, "charm," but echoing the plural of *lepus*, "hare," famous for their fecundity and, in the Middle Ages, for their supposed anal intercourse).¹³ Likewise in the (rather more lubricious than salubrious) connotations of *erumpere* or *ostendere*.¹⁴

conveys the idea that men themselves, rather than their mores, are defiled by improper speech, which is particularized as "perverted" or "twisted," rather than the more general "evil."

¹² Or, as here, *pestis*. While the image is not uncommon, I think it relevant that in the *Liber* he uses the same word to describe *sodomia*. He is among the first to describe same-sex attraction as a plague or contagion, and in his medical model he recommends surgical remedies for removing the infected parts from the body of the Church. In fact, castration imagery is employed throughout, although this is not Peter's proposed solution to the problem. Jean de Meun employs similar language in the Genius section of his poem.

¹³ Lewis and Short notes that *salax* derives from the "leaping" character of certain male animals or their members, and it was applied by the ancients to Priapus in particular and aphrodisiac drugs. This intimate verbal exchange may be understood to excite or provoke lust.

¹⁴ For the sexual senses of *rumpo* and *tendo* and their derivatives, see Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

Wordplay is figured as sexplay. The connection is made even more explicit if we allow a misreading of *verba* for *verpa* here (and throughout the *Liber*).¹⁵ If so, *ver[p]orum inanum pestes insolenter erumpunt* should be read as “the plagues of useless pricks which spew in a manner contrary to custom.”¹⁶ The very playfulness he condemns here is embraced in the expansion of his exculpation:

¹⁵ Paleography makes us familiar with the idiosyncrasies of medieval orthography. Changes in the spoken and written language over time and place should encourage us to entertain slippage as a potent generator of puns. Isidore of Seville treats of orthographic slippage and substitution of letters, with perhaps revealing examples: “We sometimes use the letter L for the letter D, as in *latum* for *datum* and *calamitatem* for *cadamitatem*, for the word ‘calamity’ is derived from ‘falling’ [*cadendum*].” Adams (49) gives extensive example of *latus* (flank) as sexual metaphor. If “flank” suggests a “gift” to Isadore, is it surprising that he smuggles a slippery “catamite” in the next clause? Isidore’s ambivalent take on *latus* is seen further on in his entry on “Glosses,” where he explains “*Latus haurit apertum*” (he gores a gaping side), a verse from the *Aeneid*: “*Item (Virg. AEn. 10,314): “haurit, percudit. Item cum ‘terminum’ dicimus ‘finem’ aut ‘populatas’ interpretamur esse ‘vastatas’ et omnino cum unius verbi rem uno verbo manifestamus”* (He gores: he stabs. Likewise, with boundary we mean limit, and despoiled is understood to be laid waste, and generally when we make clear the meaning of one word by another word). Isadore’s gloss of *haurit* as *percutit* (to strike) obfuscates another possible reading: *hauro* also means “to drink or swallow,” so the decontextualized line might mean “He strikes his exposed flank” or “He swallows his naked cock.” In context, the subject of the verb is not an unnamed third person singular actor, but a *gladius*. Then, again, with the proximity of *terminum* and *finem*, maybe Isadore doesn’t obscure a sexual meaning, but rather redoubles one: both refer to the penis. *Percutio* also means to “pierce,” with obvious sexual potential. Pierrugues is without doubt that it holds this potential; Adams is less certain, although he identifies plentiful use of derivative terms in *-cutio*, and concedes, “Certain other verbs of beating or striking were probably used off-the-cuff, but evidence for them is more fleeting.” (147) Both authors gloss *percussor* (piercer) as “penis.” Earlier in the same item, discussing the use of the letter *kappa*, Isidore offers these examples: *kaput, kanna, kalamus*. (Head, flute, rod; all had sexual applications, then as now.) Like Damian, who may be imitating him, Isadore has a tendency to parse words that have equivocal meanings.

¹⁶ Some critics might see this as unconscious, an eruption of the repressed. In his recent study *Queering Medieval Genres* Tison Pugh maintains, “Certainly, such authors as Peter Damian, Alain de Lille, and the Gawain-poet vilify homosexuality unequivocally.” (Pugh, 11) I think we do the intelligence and humor of Damian a disservice to deny its intentionality, its equivocation. Larry Scanlon is the rare reader who recognizes the bishop’s gambit. However, when he writes of the “incidental wordplay of the sort of which Peter, the former rhetorician, was so fond” (Scanlon 39), even he downplays the importance of the ludic. This is not incidental to, but constitutive of, the meaning of Damian’s text.

Mox enim, ut verba conserimus, paulatim quaedam lenocinia confabulationis adulterinae subrepunt¹⁷, quae omnem animi rigorem indecenter emolliant, et severitatis robur in excussum risum et turpia ioca dissolvant. [. . .] Quod si nos vel pudore vel metu in haec declinare contemnimus, mox inhumani rigidi et quos Hyrcanae genuerint tigres saxe iudicamur. Reprimo calatum. Nam ut turpiores attexantur ineptiae, pudore suffundor[. . .]

For as soon as we join in conversation, certain allurements of impure conversation gradually creep in, which indecently softens all the rigor of the will, and dissolves our robust severity in shivering laughter and filthy jokes[. . .] But if we, through either shame or fear, disparage ourselves for deviating in these things, may I immediately be judged as inhuman and unbending as the stony tigers the Hycanians breed. But now I had better stop writing. I blush with shame if more scandalous absurdities should be added [. . .] (57.29)¹⁸

Throughout, the preponderant imagery is of rigidity and eventual detumescence. There is, for instance, the *robur severitatis* (serious hardness) which dissolves into *excussus risus* and *turpia ioca*. The

¹⁷ Some texts read *surripiunt*, to steal or take by stealth. According to Kennerly M. Woody, this confusion was a frequent one in Damian's writings. He even uses it as evidence for Damian's hand in the composing of a document. "[I]t seems hardly a coincidence that Damiani was in the habit of using *surripere* where he ought to use *surrepere*," he argues. In that case, we should suspect an idiosyncratic association between stealthy plunder and slithering under someone. ("Sagena Piscatoris: Peter Damiani and the Papal Election Decree of 1059," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Volume 1 University of California Press (Berkeley) 1970, pp. 33–54.)

¹⁸ Compare this to the letter (no doubt known to Damian) of Cicero, writing to Papirius Paetus, exemplifying the Stoic attitude toward language:

Amo verecundiam, vel potius libertatem loquendi. [. . .] sed, ut dico, placet Stoicis suo quamque rem nomine appellare. Sic enim disserunt: nihil esse obscoenum, nihil turpe dictu; nam, si quod sit in obscoenitate flagitium, id aut in re esse aut in verbo; nihil esse tertium. (Epistulas Familiares XXII)

I like modesty in language: you prefer plain speaking. [. . .] However, as I say, the Stoic doctrine is to call everything by its right name. They argue as follows: nothing is obscene, nothing unfit to be expressed: for if there is anything disgraceful in obscenity, it consists either in the thing meant or in the word: there is no third alternative[.] (*The Letters of Cicero*, Vol. III, trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh, George Bell & Sons (London) 1900, p. 293.)

Sean McConnell believes that Cicero's epistolary community was expected to "exercise ingenuity and verve in construing meaning." (*Philosophical Life in Cicero's Letters*, Cambridge University Press, (2014) p.18.)

dissolute mechanism that precipitates this languor may be hinted at by *excussus*, which means “shaken out,” “tossed off.” In particular, it is an agricultural term, referring to the gathering of fruit or nuts by the shaking of the tree or branches. It also pertained to the threshing of grain. As it happens, *risus* is rice, which is also collected this way. More than an easy pun, this, too, resonates with Damian’s subtext if we picture white seed falling to the ground.¹⁹ This continues the innuendo expressed in a rustic vocabulary. Another sense may be in play: *excussus* means “stiff,” or “stretched out.” Laughter is a type of ejaculate (*excusso* is to discharge). The notion of dilation and puffing up within *excusso*, makes the shuddering body a stand-in for the cock. *Excusum* (one *s*) is a participial form of *excudo* to beat or hammer, as in a forge. So Damian imagines these symposiasts pounding out their laughter.²⁰ I also see a play on *excuso*, with which Damian subliminally pardons himself. There may be a fine line between absolution and dissolution.

¹⁹ According to *Du Cange*, besides a “*Batteur en grange*,” an *excussor* was “*Parricida, homicida, sicarius, satelles, latro, etc.*” So, too, these beaters may be homicidal, or spermicidal.

The Latin reader might entertain other notions based on the phoneme *-cus*. In Epigram 82, Ausonius advises the cunnilingitor Eunus against pursuit of a perfume-seller:

perspice, ne mercis fallant te nomina, vel ne
aere Seplasiae decipiare cave,
dum κύσθον κύστονque putas communis odoris
et nardum ac sardas esse sapore pari.

Watch out that the names of her wares do not deceive you,
And take care that you are not misled by the odour of Seplasia.
Think not that costus and cysthus have the same odor,
Or that nard and sardines taste the same.

De Figuris Veneris tells us that *cysthus* (the Greek κύσθος) are the private parts of a woman. On *sardas* the same author explains, “By this salty condiment Ausonius means to imply precisely the same as the author of the Greek epigram signifies, when he speaks of the Salt Sea, and which he himself has called *salgama*, meaning the secretion of the humid vulva.” See *The Manual of Classical Erotology* Friedrich Karl Forberg, Manchester: Private Printing (1894) p.176.

²⁰ *Risus* is found as a form of *rixa*, contention, contest. Is this a competitive circle-jerk?

Peter emphasizes conversation's dissolution of rigor and the emollient effect of language. “[O]mnem animi rigorem indecenter emolliant,” he writes: it softens all the rigor of the will. Here, *rigor* is not only an abstract quality of the mind. It is a metaphorical cock,²¹ indecently made soft. Tropologically, *robur* is robust firmness; principally it is the oak, or any notably hard wood. It is also the trunk of such a tree. It is also the pith of a plant, or its kernel. All useful vehicles for phallic wordplay. Besides the softening denoted by *mollio*, comes the inevitable echo of *molles*, the effeminate or catamite, reinforced by the well-known medieval use of *iocus* for homosexual horseplay. Indeed, the entire imagined confab is pictured as a bawdyhouse (or molly house): *lenocinia confabulationis*. *Lenocinium* is pimping or pandering; by extension, enticement and ornament. This effusion of laughter and coincident softening of rigor is sexually exhausting, if not emasculating.

Language—spoken or inscribed—is sexually suspect. [*U*]t *verba conserimus* conflates two charged meanings: “to sow, to plant” and “to intertwine, to join” words. If the tongue is an obvious metonym for the penis, so is the pen. *Verba* are either the organs to be united, or the seed to be scattered.²² Damian easily jumps from imagining the dangers of shared conversation to a vision of solitary vice: “*Reprimo*

²¹ An anonymous Latin poem offers this prayer for a cold day: *Vincere nec libeat villosa veste rigorem, / Sed iungat calidum fervida virgo latus* (Don't desire to conquer (f)rigidity with a shaggy coat/But may a fiery girl give you a hot fuck). A variant—“*villosa beste*”—advises avoiding a “shaggy animal” in favour of the girl. (In *Anthologia Latina sive Poesis Latinae supplementum: Carmina in codicibus scripta*. edd Franciscus Buecheler and Alexander Riese, *Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum*, Leipzig: Teubner (1894) p. 147.) Closer to Damian's day, William of Blois' *Alda* uses *rigor* for penis: “*tunc sedet ille tumor, pendet rigor ante superbus*” (Now the bulge relaxes, the hard-on heretofore so proud just wilts). See Adams, p. 46 and 59, for this example.

²² *Consero* appears in a double entendre of Tibullus: “*At Venus invenit puero concubere furtim, / Dum timet et teneros conserit usque sinus*” (Love devises to lie with the boy on the sly/While he trembles and unites their breasts unceasingly). The conclusion could be understood salaciously: While he shudders, and going all the way casts his seed into her tender holes. Tibullus also plays with the idea of *consero* as conversation and contest in what follows: “*Et dare anhelanti pugnantibus umida linguis/Oscula*” (And giving wet kisses, gasping and with tongues in contention).

calamum,” he writes. “I put down my pen,” certainly, but also “I hold my cock in check.”²³ (*Calamus*, whether pen or reed, is a ready symbol of the male organ.²⁴ Of *reproto*, Lewis and Short cite examples where “the figure [is] borrowed from the restraining, confining of a stream.) And need we give a simple reading to *suffundor*? Again, “I blush” is the surface sense, but—given all that has gone before—can we discount the *fluidity* that suffuses the word? Perhaps, “I flow below.” Damian’s reader is advised to entertain every nuance of his vocabulary as he pores (or pours) over the letter.

Irregular *Verba*

Of course, such profuse proliferation, itself, is a sign of irregular sexuality. Damian indicates *from the first* that he will employ ambiguity and ambivalence in the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, revealing a poet’s sense of the propensity of words to multiply their meanings. For example, in the first chapter of the *Liber Gomorrhianus*, Damian writes: “*Quoddam autem nefandum et ignominiosum valde vitium in nostris partibus inolevit*,” which Peter Payer (p. 27) translates: “A certain abominable and terribly shameful vice has grown up in our region.” Of course, to gloss *nostris partibus* geographically is legitimate. But Peter may be putting paronomasia in play. “These parts” are also “our parts,” that is, our body’s members.²⁵

²³ He does no such thing; the letter continues at length.

²⁴ In Greek mythology Kalamos, son of Maeander, was the lover of Karpos, a beautiful young man. When the latter drowned, the other was transformed into the (very phallic) river reed that bears his name. Karpos too was metamorphosed: into the vine (His name means “fruit.” The association of the two was enduring.

²⁵ See Adams, especially page 45, on *pars* as sexual metonym. The body is semperpresent to Damian. In the same passage where he hints at dubiety, he speaks of “*totum corpus Ecclesiae*” (the entire body of the church), beginning with its seat and ending with its head (*sedes omnium Ecclesiarum; uno capite ecclesiasticae*). *Sedes* and *caput* are well-attested as figures for the ass and penis in Latin literature. In *GELL*, for example, Pierrugues cites use of *caput (pro pene)* in the writings of Cicero, Catullus, Tibullus, Juvenal, Lactantius, Lucilius, Petronius, Propertius, Suetonius, and the *Priapea*. *Sedo* and its cognates are seen in Tertullian, Catullus, Juvenal, and Petronius. Adams notes that a sexual *sedes* appears in Pliny. Of course, not every use of these

There is the hint that this is confessional, that this circumlocution is part and parcel of the “unspeakability” of the sin in question.²⁶ Damian refers to himself in the first person plural, *nos*, throughout. “*In nostris partibus*,” therefore, suggests that the vice has grown in *Damian’s own* sexual parts.

The use of the verb, *inolesco* (“to grow in, on, to” anything) is noteworthy, too. It introduces an agronomic metaphor that Damian will employ elsewhere. The *vitium* grows *in* (or, perhaps, into, with the sense of “is ingrafted to”) the body. The image of penetration is immediately implanted in the mind of the reader. In fact, the particle “*in*” proliferates in this text, intensifying this sense of *movement into*. Such as is seen in *intimo* or *inquino* (*incunire* = “to befoul,” “to shit in,” with echoes of *cunnus/con*).²⁷ This is also the first of many times that Damian allows the slippage between *vitium* (vice) and *vitis* (vine or branch, with possible phallic potential, whence the French *vit* and English *wit*.) In short, in this short introit to the issue of sodomy, Damian introduces doubt about its location and locution; its means and

terms must carry these connotations. Otherwise, we would have to imagine that for Anglophones every sports event is laden with eroticism because of the coin toss’ “heads or tails.”

²⁶ In the first words of his letter he refers to “*nefandum et detestabile crimen*.” Or, continuing this theme of unspeakability, *nefandum et ignominiosum vitium*, *nefandum et detestabile crimen*, *hoc nefarium scelus*, and *nefanda turpitudo*. Curiously, in a text intended to identify irregularity, Damian uses circumlocutions like this throughout. When he does attempt to name the sin, he is also roundabout. It is called variously, *peccatum Sodomorum*, *Sodomitica immunditia*, *Sodomiticum scelus*, *ardor Sodomiticae libidinis*. The sinner is called *vir Sodomita* and *Sodomitas*. Alluding to the bible, *principes Sodomorum* and *populus Gomorrhæ*. In an allegorical trope he describes *Haec pestilentissima Sodomorum regina* and *pestis illa Gomorrhiana*. Only late in the text does he devise his own *idioma: sodomia*.

²⁷ Likewise, the particle *con* abounds, suggesting shared activity or sentiment, with a similar salubrious echo: *confundo*, *concubo*, *contamino*, *consto*, and, of course, *confiteor* and *confessus* (where *fessus* might connote the lassitude brought on by sex (see Adams). *Fesso* would bring to the medieval Italian mind the cleft between the buttocks (*Linea che separa le natiche*) or the female genitalia (*Fesso genitale: organo sessuale femminile*). See the entry in *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*, 15/19 FERSA-FUTURO, Florence: Opera del Vocabolario Italiano, Istituto del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (2013).

agents.

Regarding this *vitium*, Damian claims that, “*cui nisi districtae animadversionis manus quantocius obviet, certum est, quod divini furoris gladius in multorum perniciem immaniter grassaturus impendet.*” That is, in Payer’s straight-forward rendering: “Unless the hand of severe punishment resists as soon as possible, there is certainly a danger that the sword of divine anger will be used savagely against it to the ruin of many.” Here, again, there is a condensation of ambiguous language in the space of a single line. *Districtae* is “severe” or “strict,” we know, but, besides the sense of censure, *distringo* also means to “touch gently” or to strip off, especially, the leaves of plants. (*Deglubo*, which also means to “peel off,” is a noted circumlocution for peeling back the foreskin, or “to jerk off,” as in Ausonius’ Epigram 79.)²⁸ The word also means to draw from a sheath (as in, for instance, Ovid, Caesar, Horace, and Livy), which connects it metaphorically (if illogically) to the *gladium* in the succeeding clause. *Gladius* is among the most frequent circumlocutions for the male member.²⁹ Its proximity to the speaker’s (or is it the sinner’s?) hand, is problematic, as is the question of the sheath from which it is to be extracted. Is it the vagina, the buttocks, or the fist created by that very hand? What’s more, and more troubling, the sexually ambiguous *gladium dei* arises throughout (as will god’s body, in general).

If we expand our discussion beyond words, themselves, Peter may be invoking an unreasonable—and

²⁸ This poem about a pornographic portrait concludes:

Crispa tamen cunctas exercet corpore in uno:
deglubit, fellat, molitur per utramque cauernam,
ne quid inexpertum frustra moritura relinquat.

Crispa, on the other hand, practices all [these vices] with a single body.
She masturbates, fellates, and is fucked at either hole,
Lest she die in vain and leave anything untried.

²⁹ Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (xviii.vi.1) offers this definition: “*Proprie autem appellatus gladius, quod gulam dividit*” (It is properly called *gladius* because it splits the throat). Did many Latin speakers associate the *gladius-penis* with a threat to the throat?

therefore, unnatural—god, one characterized by madness and rage, a sense which is corroborated by the adverb *immaniter*. Unmeasured or immoderate, but also, monstrous. And what are we to make of this *gladius* which *hangs over* (both Adams and *GELL* note that *pondus*—from *pendo*—denotes *viri genitalia*) the sinner immensely? Or—if we take the verb to be *impendo*, rather than *impendeo*—expends itself excessively?³⁰

Going with the flow, Peter proceeds: “*Pudet dicere, pudet tam turpe flagitium sacris auribus intimare*” (It is shameful to say, shameful to hint to sacred ears such a foul disgrace”—but also, “It is shameful to put into the ears of the holy ones such a *furious demand*,” or (if there be slippage between *auribus* and *oribus*) “to put in the *mouths* of the holy ones such a *foul, disgraceful object*” (where *flagitium* means not “a burning request,” but a more substantial “shameful *thing*”).³¹

Damian’s begins the conclusion of his address to the pope with a citation from the gospel (Matthew 18:6): “*Qui scandalizaverit unum ex his pusillis, expedit ei ut suspendatur mola asinaria in collo ejus, et demergatur in profundum maris.*” (Whoso shall offend one of these little ones it were better for him that a millstone were hung about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.) Allowing for the lability of Latin, this sails close to: “If any should tempt these little boys, it would be better for him that the bulk (or erection, or large stone) of an ass-driver were to hang down his throat (or asshole, if *collo* slips into *culo/cullo*), and to be plunged into the bottom of a man.”³² *Maris* invites semantic

³⁰ *Impendo* means “to spend,” often wastefully. This image of “th’expense of spirit” is well-known for unnatural sexual activity, whether onanistic or homosexual.

³¹ *GELL*: “*Flagitium — Quidquid infame.*”

³² As seen in the Ausonius epigram above, *molo* (to grind) is a Latin euphemism for sex. In Petronius (23.5), Encolpius describes the assault of a cinaedus: “*Super inguina mea diu multumque frustra moluit*” (On top of my groin, he ground long and a lot, in vain). In another example, Horace (*Satires* 1.2.32–36) applauds,

“Macte virtute esto” inquit sententia dia Catonis;
“nam simul ac venas inflavit taetra libido,

ambiguity. Is it the genitive of *mare* (sea) or *mas* (man)? Besides suggesting a preference for more adult intercourse, the ability to adopt biblical passages for their pornographic potential, shows a flexibility that goes beyond playfulness, and approaches blasphemy. A similar practice even found a sort of sanction in the *sermon joyeux*. Emile Picot writes of these parodic lectures which frequently preceded *les grands mystères*:

huc iuvenes aequom est descendere, non alienas
permolere uxores."

"Praised be such virility," runs Cato's divine advice,
"When loathsome lust inflates their cocks,
It is best the young men come down here at once,
Rather than grind away at others' wives."

See Adams (152–53) for a discussion of "grind" as erotic metaphor. The euphemism also occurs in the Bible. Job (Job 31:10) swears, "May my wife grind to another" ("*Molat alteri uxor mea*"), which most commentaries understand as a euphemism. The same idea is seen, it is said, in Judges 16:21, where Samson's treatment at the hands of the Philistines is sexual assault: *Samson et clausum in carcere molere fecerunt* (And shut up in prison, they made Samson grind). Likewise in Lamentations 5:13, where the verse "*Adulescentibus in pudice abusi sunt et pueri in ligno corruerunt*" (Young men are compelled to grind at the mill, boys stagger under loads of wood) was understood in a sexual sense by Jerome.

In analyzing the Hebrew *hapax legomenon* נַחַת Gideon R. Kotzé writes:

In this regard, נַחַת might also be a euphemism for sexual intercourse: "They [the enemy] took young men to 'grind' [them]". Lamentations Rabbah 5:13 §1 mentions this as a possible interpretation of the passage and refers to a similar use of נַחַת in Judges 16:21: "And he [Samson] ground at the mill in the prison" (Cohen 1961:241). Tractate Sotah 10a, which forms part of Seder Nashim in the Babylonian Talmud, expounds the meaning of נַחַת in the same way in connection with the episode recounted in Judges 16:21: "R. Johanan said: 'Grind' means nothing else than [sexual] transgression; and thus it is stated, Then let my wife grind unto another" (Cohen 1936:45). This line of interpretation probably exercised an influence on Jerome via his Jewish confidants, considering the fact that V offers an obscene interpretation of the Hebrew text of Lamentations 5:13a: *adulescentibus in pudice abusi sunt* ("they unchastely misused the young men").

See Kotzé's dissertation, *A Text-critical Analysis of the Lamentations Manuscripts from Qumran (3QLam, 4QLam, 5QLama and 5QLamb)*, University of Stellenbosch (2011) pp. 208–10. On the same point, see *The Targum of Lamentations*, The Aramaic Bible, Volume 17, Part 2, edited by Philip S. Alexander, Collegeville: Liturgical Press (2007), p. 184.

Comme les véritables sermons, les sermons joyeux débutent d'ordinaire par une citation latine, et c'est dans ces parodies, qui sont comme une réminiscence de la fête des fous, que se montre le plus clairement la tolérance des autorités ecclésiastiques. Les textes bibliques sont d'ordinaire travestis de la façon la plus grotesque; le signe de la croix et l'Ave Maria subissent eux-mêmes des transformations bouffonnes.

Like true sermons, sermons joyeux ordinarily begin with a Latin citation, and it is in these parodies, which are reminiscent of the Feast of Fools, that the tolerance of the ecclesiastic authorities is most clearly shown. Biblical texts are usually travestied in the most grotesque fashion; the sign of the cross and the Ave Maria, themselves, undergo buffoon transformations.

In Greek there is a connection between αἰδοῖον (*aidoion*, private parts) and αἰδοῖος (*aidoios*, venerable).

A similar association occurs in Latin *vererum* (cock) and *vereor* (to stand in awe).³³ One also sees this tendency in other authors, e.g. Clement of Alexandria or Alain de Lille, especially in his *Distinctiones dictiōnum theologicarum*.³⁴

Damian concludes his preamble by suggesting another impediment: “*Et nisi quantocius sedis apostolicae vigor occurrat, non est dubium, quin effrenata nequitia cum restringi voluerit, a cursus sui impetu desistere nequeat.*” (According to Payer: “And unless the strength of the Apostolic see intervenes as soon as possible, there is no doubt but that this unbridled wickedness, even though it should wish to be restrained, will be unable to stop on its headlong course.”)³⁵ But this might also be read: “And unless

³³ See Adams (p 53–54) on *vererum* as a gloss on αἰδοῖον.

³⁴ In one appeal to Scripture, Clement employs a device which I maintain Damian embraces to excess. That is, the biblical allusion as obscene pun. Quoting Proverbs 14.3, Clement reminds us, “In the mouth of a fool, is the rod of pride.” (In Latin: “*In ore stulti virga superbiae.*” In Greek: ἐκ στόματος ἀφρόνων βακτηρία ὕβρεως) But this could also be understood as, “In the fool’s mouth is the prick of pride,” with concomitant ambiguity about whether the fool is patient of irrumation, or agent of fellation. Clement only obfuscates in his clarification (or perhaps tips his hand that he intends a salacious reading): “I admire the wisdom of the apostle when he advises us for this reason not to use words that are coarse or out of place.” The word *virga* is (or may be) coarse, and its mention prompts the question, What is its place? This emphasis on language is, perhaps, not surprising. This theoretical/theological nexus of truth and language stems, no doubt, from the author’s belief in the identity of the two in the divine Logos.

³⁵ Payer, p.28.

the vigor of the apostle's *seat* present itself, there is no doubt³⁶ that unreined iniquity, even though it wished to be held back, will be unable to stop its paroxysm³⁷ from its flow." The rush expressed by *impetus* is also communicated by the words *occuro* and *cursus*, both from *curro*, to race. *Nequitia*, in contrast, usually connotes inaction; as *nequeat*, incapacity.³⁸ As before, the author flirts with images of restraint and unwanted *fluxus*.³⁹ Exactly how a *nequitia effrenata*—an unreined lewdness—would hold itself back is unclear.⁴⁰ Even more mysterious is *why* it should want to. It is possible that Damian, the early proponent of flagellation, also appreciated the recondite pleasures of “edging.”

In the first chapter of the letter, proper, Damian lays out the fourfold variety of sodomy: “*Ut autem res vobis tota per ordinem pateat, ex hujus nequitiae scelere quatuor diversitates fiunt. Alii siquidem secum, alii aliorum manibus, alii inter femora, alii denique consummato actu contra naturam*

³⁶ *Dubius* is vacillating back and forth. Its sense of mental wavering derives from this physical motion. *Dubius* is a conjunction of *duhibius*, *duohabeo*, held as two or double, hence doubtful. *Lewis and Short* defines it as “moving in two directions alternately, vibrating to and fro, fluctuating,” and gives as synonyms *ambiguus*, *incertus*, *perplexus*, *duplex*.

³⁷ *Impetus* is a fit, or (in mechanics) the pressure of a load.

³⁸ *Nequitia* is related to *nequus*, impure, and *nequam*, injury. It also recalls *iniquus*, evil, and Evil, itself: *Multi quidem errant dicentes: Sanguine nostro/Vicimus Iniquum, quo manente vincere nolunt* (Many err saying, ‘We will overcome the Devil with our blood’ who will not win while he persists). (See Commodianus *Instructiones* 62)

³⁹ The restraint in *restringo* is opposed to the idea of freedom in *effrenatus*. The meanings of the first encompass the ideas of constriction, restriction, and severity. From this sense of withholding, it suggests miserly close-fistedness. In fact, the word's root means “to squeeze.” *Restringo* is a synonym of *retineo*, whence our word “reins.”

⁴⁰ There may be a pun here. *Nequitia* resembles *inequito*, to mount or ride a horse, which suggests reins, in turn. This passage necessarily recalls the passage in *Phaedrus* where the soul's charioteer must rein the “horse” of desire when gazing on a beautiful boy. Besides a “rein” or “bridle,” *frenum* is the skin of the penis attached to the glans (See Aulus Cornelius Celsus' *De Medicina*). Perhaps it is this which one is to pull back (*restringo*).

delinquunt.”⁴¹ (So the entire business might be set before you in order, four varieties of this iniquitous crime may be made: Some transgress with themselves alone; some with others using hands; some between the thighs; and finally some through a completed act against nature.) Besides the distinctions in the kinds of this crime, Damian hints here at a progression, a slippery slope of sodomy: Solitary solace leads to mutual masturbation,⁴² which segues to intercrural sex, which is a hair’s breadth from anal intercourse. (See Jordan, 130 ff.)

⁴¹ A variation of the text reads: *alii siquidem semetipsos polluunt, alii sibi invicem inter se manibus virilia contrectantes inquinantur, alii inter femora, alii fornicantur in terga.* (Some pollute themselves; some befoul each other manually by mutually fondling their cocks; some fuck between the thighs; and others, in the ass). Besides the surface sense of “to touch” (often “illicitly”), *contrecto* implies inspection or contemplation. The form here is similar to *contractantes*, from *contraho*, to contract (including disease). The question of what these wankers stain themselves with may be answered by a cacomphaton: *se manibus* sounds like *semenibus*—with lots of semen.

⁴² One may bear in mind the “queer” nature of masturbation for the medieval mind. Besides the non-procreative nature of the act, it also employed an “unnatural” vessel: the hand. Insofar as the action of the hand simulated the function of the vagina (or, for women, the penis), some medieval authors saw masturbation as problematic for the gender of the individual engaged in it: the body becomes thereby two-sexed, and the sin could be seen as “hermaphroditic.”

This mindset persists. A recent polemic against pornography made similar claims: “First, masturbation can be a form of homosexuality because it is a sexual act that does not involve a woman. If a man were to masturbate while engaged in other forms of sexual intimacy with his wife then he would not be doing so in a homosexual way. However, any man who does so without his wife in the room is bordering on homosexuality activity, particularly if he’s watching himself in a mirror and being turned on by his own male body.” The premise is meant to provoke “homosexual panic” in his audience. The reader is supposed to prefer celibacy to being seen as (or seeing himself as) queer; he is, as it were, scared straight. Paradoxically, the same self-regard the writer activates to discourage masturbation is, itself, seen as sexually suspicious: “masturbation is a form of monosexuality because it is sex that does not include another person.” The denigration of monosexuality (*mano-sexuality?*) no doubt derives from an ideal of sex-as-complementarity, which is also a frequent argument against homosexuality. Rather than the spectre of the hermaphrodite, this pamphleteer maligns another mythic poolboy, the self-regarding sissy Narcissus. (See Mark Driscoll, “Porn-Again Christianity: A Frank Discussion on Pornography and Masturbation,” Mars Hill Church, Seattle (2009) pp. 21–22. According to a *Seattle Times* article describing the disintegration of the Mars Hill megachurch and its self-serving pastor, “[Mark Driscoll] described America as a ‘pussified nation’ of ‘homoerotic worship loving momma’s boy sensitive emasculated neutered’ men raised by ‘bitter penis envying burned feministed single mothers’ and made other, cruder statements about women.” (Craig Welch, “The rise and fall of Mars Hill Church,” September 13, 2014.)

In this gradation of gravity, Damian (29) clarifies with a telling phrase: “*et in his ita per gradus ascenditur, ut quaeque posteriora praecedentibus graviora judicentur.*” (And we ascend by these steps, these last are to be judged more severely than the preceding ones (or: the ones that led the way). *Gradus* is a step, stage, or degree, suggesting progression or, perhaps, degradation. A *gradus* is also a set of steps up to a bed, linking this progress with sexual advances. The word also hints at the church’s *gradus*, an ecclesiastic order, and that the sinner may be advancing in the church hierarchy as (or because) he descends into sodomy. Here, those that come behind (*posteriora*) are more guilty than those who go before (*praecedentibus*)—if the reader considers a spatial image of the sinners, Peter’s point is intensified, for those behind are more culpable than those in front of them. This goes against the common notion that the “passive” partners are greater sinners because less masculine, further from “natural” sexuality. It should be noted, too, that the similar word *praecidentibus* means “those who refuse” and, paradoxically, those who withdraw. Comically, when applied to speech (and discourse as intercourse?) it describes those who finish abruptly. *Praecido* means “to cut off, castrate,” which is more troubling still. (Perhaps prefiguring the punishment of the crime which Damian would recommend—paradoxically, a condition which would obviate the commission of the crime.) *The praecidentes* are not only the actors (the fuckers) but their cutting implements; and the *posteriora ra* are the behinds before them. (See Adams, p. 115–16, for *posterior*, *posteriora* as buttocks and anus.)

In his *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, Adams offers a lengthy entry on *caedo* and its intensive derivates, like *percido* and *concido* (p. 146–46). Adams: “One of the largest semantic fields from which metaphors for sexual acts were taken in Latin is that of striking, beating and the like” and “Metaphors from this semantic area could be freely coined.”⁴³ These verbs of cutting and striking are frequent in classical and

⁴³ Adams (145): “*Caedo* was one such metaphor. Used literally it possessed the senses ‘cut’ and ‘beat’, either of which might have served as the basis for a sexual metaphor. The *mentula* is often described metaphorically as a sharp instrument, and hence its function might be seen as cutting. But *caedo* is more commonly used = “beat,” and this is the meaning which probably lay behind

later Latin writers for the sexual act, in particular, for pedication. Words formed from *caedo*, carried the added sense of punishment, so they are particularly relevant for an analysis of Peter Damian's prose. More confusion is introduced if one allows for slippage between *praecedo*, *praecido*, and *praesideo* (to sit before; to protect). *Praesidentes* are those who preside over or guard others, or those of higher rank. This is especially important for Damian, whose stated aim will be to guard against the clergy's abuse of their inferiors. The term has the root *sedes*, for seat, so the expression conjures images of those who sit before or in front of others.

Besides the confusion of words containing *caedo* or *cido* and *cado* (to strike or cut and to fall) there is potential significance in the easy substitution of *prae* with *per*, where the meaning of the prefix shifts from "first" to "fully." The *GELL* says the term *percidere* is "*verbum flagitiosum*," that is, relating to *pedicatio*, and refers the reader to Plautus' *The Persian* II.4. That passage is pertinent here for it plays on these same words, with a strongly sexual suggestiveness. The slave Sagaristio threatens, "*Caedere hodie tu restibus*," to the sassy Paegnium,⁴⁴ who responds, "*Non hercle, si os perciderim tibi, metuam, morticine.*" ("You'll be whipped with ropes today" and "By god, if I were to unload on your mouth, I wouldn't be afraid, you dead piece of flesh.

Concerning the punishment (or penance) for this sin, Damian says: "*Major siquidem poenitentia illis imponitur qui cum aliis cadunt, quam iis qui per semetipsos sordescunt;*⁴⁵ et

the metaphor (although . . . one and the same word can provide different types of sexual metaphors)."

⁴⁴ The character's name is a transliteration of Greek παιγνιον, boy-toy. The word also means "wordplay."

⁴⁵ *Sordesco*, besides meaning to defile, also has an agricultural meaning that may be relevant here: to go untilled.

districtius judicantur qui actum consummant, quam ii qui inter femora coinquinantur.”

(Therefore, a greater punishment is imposed on these who fall with others, than on those who defile themselves, and those who consummate the act are to be judged more strictly than those who are tainted between the legs.) *Coinquino* means “to defile all over, to pollute wholly, to contaminate,” so Damian allows the reader to conjure an image of the *global* pollution of the body, even as he localizes the sin, itself—in the anus or between the thighs. The word also is near enough to *coinquo*, which means, again, “to cut off,” perhaps, picking up in the cutting image in the preceding passage. It seems Damian wants his *poenas* to be sharp, indeed. (In the next chapter Damian will claim “*et poenitentiae quidem pondus quamlibet grave devote suscipiunt*” (some suffer the burden of penance devoutly, howsoever grave). This heavy penance is also a weighty cock. *Pondus* is attested (in Petronius and Catullus, for instance) as a metaphor for “*viri genitalia*.⁴⁶” Damian’s idea of this penile penalty is conveyed in the rest of the sentence, too. *Suscipeo* is to receive or submit, but also to begat or bear children. Cause and effect are joined in one word: *patior* meets *parior*; to bear meets birth. This, in turn, echoes *gravis*, which means “gravid, pregnant,” as well as heavy. Finally, *devote*, which ostensibly signals the piety with which the penitent suffers, communicates the degree to which one is given (or abandoned) to a habit.

Having outlined the types or stages of sodomy and the position given to each in a program of punishment, Damian lays the blame for the sin at the devil’s door:

⁴⁶ In the twelfth-century elegiac comedy *Alda* by William of Blois, the guileless heroine is told of a market for male members, where “*impar erat premium pro ponderis imparitate*” (the different prices were based on the different sizes of the wares). Besides Adams (p. 71), see a discussion of this scene and its relation to the fabliaux in “*L’Alda di Guglielmo di Blois: storia degli studi e proposte interpretative*” by Armando Bisanti (in *Scrinium, quaderni ed estratti di Schede Medievali* 8, pp 54–55).

Hos itaque corruendi gradus artifex diaboli machinatio reperit, ut quo altius per eos ascenditur, eo proclivius infelix anima ad gehennalis barathri profunda mergatur.

And thus, the crafty machination of the devil discovers these steps to ruin, on which the unhappy soul by ascending higher is plunged more precipitously into the deep abyss of Gehenna.

The Escheresque image of a diabolical stair which descends as it rises is typical of Damian. The polar word *altius* means both higher and deeper. The word *ascendo* means to rise, but also “to grow” and “to mount.” All these have a sexual correlate.⁴⁷ *Proclivis*, registers as “downward” but also as “easily,” perhaps though custom (or proclivity). *Barathrum* is “abyss,” or “pit.”⁴⁸ Of course, any word for “hole” can be applied to both male and female anatomy, and *barathrum*’s sense as “fundament” may be augmented by the proximity of *profunda* in Damian’s text.⁴⁹ *Profundo*, too, is dubious—meaning both “to gush out,” “to stretch at full length,” and “to prostrate.” Gehenna, a burning hole, has potential as a vehicle for the anus.⁵⁰ Damian’s

⁴⁷ Columella’s *de Rusticus* 6.37 describes a “machine” that facilitates a mare’s insemination by a he-ass: “ut et prona melius ineuntis semina recipiat, et facilem sui tergoris ascensum ab editiore parte minori quadrupedi praebeat” (Leaning thus, she may better receive the semen’s in-coming, so the smaller quadruped may more easily attempt a mounting of her backside from a higher ground).

⁴⁸ Also “maw.” (This usage is labeled “jocose or satiric” in *Lewis & Short*.) Perhaps, suggested here by *altum* as participle of *alo*, to nourish?

⁴⁹ Martial employs *barathrum* euphemistically in epigram 3.81: “*Quid cum femineo tibi, Baetice galle, barathro? Haec debet medios lambere lingua viros*” (What have you to do with a woman’s depths, Baeticus, you eunuch? That tongue should be lapping at men’s middles.)

⁵⁰ Damian deploys the word in a similar sense later: “*Nec valet ad obtinendum honoris culmen assurgere, qui in mortalis culpe barathrum non ambigitur cecidisse*” (Nor is he able to aspire to attain the height of honor, who has without doubt fallen into the pit of mortal guilt). In this case, the dubious nature of that guilty abyss may be signaled by the assertion “*non ambigitur*.” There is a tropological meaning of *ambigo*, which signifies “to go around,” so a “falling into sin without having gone around” may be hinted at. (Paradoxically, since it is the fourth mode of sodomy that is under discussion there.) Verbal ambiguity is also indicated: *ambigitur* suggests speaking in a roundabout way. In Quintilian *ambages* refers to circumlocution and other obscuring or ambiguous devices. Instances of such ambiguity may occur in this very sentence.

gehennalis barathri profunda is a hole-y trinity. All that's missing is a prick. The *infelix anima* may perform its function. We've seen how *anima* can represent semen, but "cock" is a possibility, too. In Prudentius' *Reply to the Address of Symmachus* Priapus is described as "*indomitum intendens animum semperque paratum ad facinus nunquam calidis dabat otia venis*" (extending an untamed animal and ever prepared for crime, never letting his hot veins relax). Here the *anima* is the animating spirit of the organ and the beast, itself. (Prudentius will not let the reader miss his meaning: *facinus* is *fascinus*; *venis* is the both "veiny pricks" and athe sex-act itself, *Venus*.) Thus, we return to the abyss, for that *honor* is both the sinner's station in the church and the state of tumescence.

Damian continues in his next chapters to expand his discussion of whether it is expedient to permit the promotion of the guilty, or even allow them to persist in clerical orders. Damian notes that the sinner is "*consuetudinaliter hac purulenta contagione foedati*" (habitually befooled by the purulent contagion). The *foedati* are the filthy, the defiled, (from *foedus*, loathsome). They are also in league with each other (*foedus* is a pact or covenant). Damian again employs the metaphor of disease or infection and introduces the notion of habit. These men are contaminated by and contracted to contagion. Both notions have bearing on an understanding of the etiology of homosexuality and its possible naturalness. (It was a byword that habit was second nature.)⁵¹

Culmen is a form of *columen* (column, pillar), so, besides an apex, it may refer to the *membrum virile*. Further ambiguity occurs if *culmen* operates as a nominative. The *culmen*, then, "*non valet assurgere*," that is, the prick cannot rise (or swell). The trope of falling and fallibility recurs. Having plunged into an asshole (the *cul* of *culmen* and *culpa* encourages this reading), the sinner will experience an inability to retain an honorable height.

⁵¹ Later, reason and law are arrayed against sodomy, *quia et rationi contrarium, et canonicis Patrum sanctionibus probatur adversum* (which is proved to be contrary to reason and against the sanctions of the canons of the Fathers). There the notion of contrariety and adversion is emphasized.

Employing a word that would become an increasingly common euphemism for homosexual practices, he claims that it seems “*praeposterum*” to reward the sinful thus. This invocation of perversion, or inversion, where that which should be in front is placed behind—or, more apt here, what is behind being placed in front—is a figure for anal sex. This is damning, for it allies the winking superiors to their sinful underlings; both are engaged in arsy-versy irregularity. In a Christian context, there is added *frisson*, for Matthew 20 claims that “*erunt novissimi primi et primi novissimi*,” where the inversion of order is a measure of God’s grace.

et dum per indiscretam discretionem non timet statum sui honoris amittere,
incitatur et inexperta praesumere, et in his quae invite praesumpsit, diutius
permanere; atque, ut ita dixerim, dum illic non feritur, ubi acrius dolet, in eo, in
quo semel corruit, coenosae obscoenitatis volutabro molliter jacet.

And while he does not dread to lose his honor’s standing through indiscreet discretion, he is incited to presume on the inexperienced, and too long persist against those he took to himself by compulsion. So, as I would say, as long as he is not punished there—where he will suffer more sharply—he effeminate lies prostrate in that pigsty of foul obscenity where he sunk once before.

“[N]on timet,” Damian observes, “*statum sui honoris amittere*” (He does not fear lose his station of honor). Clear enough. Still, by muddying the surface meaning, we may scare up an alternative gloss. *Amitto*, is to send away or, in a less active or intentional aspect, to let fall. Lewis and Short tells us that it usually implies a less serious fault than *perdeo* or *omitto*.⁵² The verb might be read as *admitto* (to let in), which Adams (206) cites as a veterinary term used to mean “to cover,” “to stud.” *Mitto*, he says, means the same, and allows, “Occasionally, a loose use of a word of this root brings it close to *futuo*, *fututio*.” While it is hard to think how such a meaning would work in

⁵² In fact, in some instances *amitto* mean to “pardon.” Damian’s *amitto* may mitigate the error slightly. The element *mit* recalls *mitis*, gentle, mild. Plautus (*Miles Gloriosus*) makes a pun on *Amitto* and *mitis* in the context of threatened sexual violence as punishment for adultery: “*Verberone etiam, an im amittis? Mitis sum equidem fustibus*” (Do I thwack him, or do you let him part? I’m already tenderized by your billyclubs).

this sentence, the proximity of *honoris* might lend it this color. And what is the sinner in danger of losing? *Statum sui honoris*, his honourable standing. *GELL* gives one use of *honor* in a sexual context. For example, at *Aeneid* 1.28, Juno laments the loss of Troy “*et rapti Ganymedis honores*” (and the charms of the ravished Ganymede). Seeing a double entendre here, the editor of *GELL* offers *integritas* as a gloss. So honor is not only an abstraction, a social construct, but a somatic condition. Susan Glancy has described the concept of “*honor*” as it relates to the integrity of slaves’ bodies (and other dis-honorable types, prostitutes, actors, adult homosexuals). As is frequent in anti-sodomitical texts, the punishment that is to come, is precisely that which entails that penalty. The dishonoured are to lose their honor; the pederasts will be fucked. The unmanly are to be unmanned. *Status* is that which is established. Hence the sense of social or institutional place or rank that Damian’s target puts at risk. It is also that which stands. Insofar as *sto* is synonymous with *erigo*, to erect, Peter may hint that the sinner is not afraid of threats to his manhood. Or, since *sto* is often used in satire in connection with impotence, while he does not fear losing his erection, he persists and perdures.

The sense of “*indiscretam discretionem*” is obscure. The opposite construction—*discretam indiscretionem*—would be a plausible paradox: a “discrete indiscretion.” But how can discretion be indiscrete? One senses that some hidden meaning must lurk within these lines. (Payer says he can make no sense of this sentence.) The idea behind *indiscretio* runs a gamut from *faux pas* to frenzy. Nevertheless, it seems evident that *indiscretio* implies indivisibility, union. So it is up to the reader to determine whether Damian’s *discretionem* conveys the idea of circumspection or uncoupling.⁵³ Of course, either is suspicious.

⁵³ One use of the word by Jerome occurs in the *Decretum (De Consecratione, dist V. causa XXIV)*:

The repetition of *praesumo* in the sentence (*praesumere*, *praesumpsit*) clues the reader to its significance (importance), though not its significance (meaning). It also prompts this reader to imagine wordplay at work—that the second instance is a different word in its surface-level sense. So, to begin, Damian’s sinner has been urged to “encroach on” or “take to himself” these

Nonne rationabilis homo dignitatem amittit, qui uel ieunium karitati, aut uigilias prefert sensus integratati, ut propter abstinentiam inmoderatam, atque indiscretam psalmorum uel officiorum decantationem aut amentiae, aut tristiciae notam incurrat?

Does not that man lose the rational dignity of man who prefers fasting to charity, and vigil-keeping to chaste thought, who for his immoderate abstinence or indiscreet singing of psalms or offices incurs the stigma of madness or melancholy?

Here, the emphasis is on irrationality, immoderation, and misplaced zeal. *Indiscretam* seems not to emphasize integrity in this case (*integritati* does), but imprudence or indiscretion. Curiously the noun it modifies—*decantationem*, singing—might be read as *decanthationem*, decantation, pouring out or siphoning liquids. This pairs well with *abstinentiam*. Peter’s passage may have influenced Alain de Lille when writing; it employs almost identical contrasts:

Quae [ir]rationabilis ratio, quae indiscreta indiscretio, quae indirecta dilectio ita in homine dormire coegit rationis scintillam, ut homo lethaeo sensualitatis poculo debriatus, in tuis legibus apostata fieret; imo etiam tuas leges illegitime debellaret?

What [ir]rational reason, what indiscreet indiscretion, what roundabout love, so coerced man’s scintilla of reason to slumber, so he—drunk in the Lethean cup of sensuality—has become an apostate to [Nature’s] laws, or even unlawfully warred against them?

Alain does not correct the problem in Peter’s paradox—to read “*discreta indiscretio*”—but introduces a tautology: *indiscreta indiscretion*, indiscreet indiscretion. What’s more, he’s produces a puzzle of his own: “*Quae rationabilis ratio*” asks, “What rational reason?”—another tautology, which every translator silently corrects to “What *irrational* reason?” Perhaps we should emend the phrase, on the model of—and echoing—“*indirecta delictio*,” as “*rationabilis deliratio*,” that is, “rational delirium.” This would have the advantage of paralleling the other constructions, with the substantive as a corruption of some sort. Another plus, the word’s original sense wafts behind it: “removal from a furrow,” with latent erotic meaning. The form—*ratio* is so common in Latin that numerous words could complete a homoeoptoton: *erratio*, *ignoratio*, *miratio*, *superatio*, *varatio* all suggest irregularity (wandering, ignorance, wonder, excess, bending).

innocents. Behind the surface is the idea that he should do so confidently, that he should “dare to.” There is a note of anticipation (or precipitation) in the word, as it were, “to take beforetime.” The second time we encounter the word, I imagine we are to understand the word as “to bring before one,” “to picture in advance.” So “*in his quae invite praesumpsit*,” then, becomes “in those actions which he has imagined unbidden.” The violation is an acting out of fantasy. (*Invite* confuses things. Are the mental images “uninvited;” are the children “unwilling,” or is even “against his inclinations”? Next I ask, “Who are these *inexperta*?” They are the novitiates—unaccustomed to or unacquainted with this sort of clerical error. They are initiates to carnal knowledge. This sense of *experio*—to lose virginal innocence—appears when a prepubescent harlot in *Satyrica* (CXXVII) admits she is “*feminam ornatam et hoc primum anno virum expertam*” (a well-supplied woman, and with experience of men just this year).⁵⁴ *Incito* is encumbered with meanings to pervert the surface sense of the passage. The sinner takes it upon himself to *incite* these ingénues—to what? The word, itself may answer the question. The *incitati* are excited, aroused, stimulated, spurred—so either penis or ass is in play.⁵⁵ *Incito* is also a corrupt form of the verb *inceio, incio*, to cause evacuation, or urination. So, again, anus and penis are brought to mind. (It also means to bring about parturition. Such a nuance might be misplaced here, but it would over-determine the word’s sexual significance.) If certain words smuggle in the idea of fight or haste, *permaneo* and *diutius* insist on duration and delay. Whatever erratic behavior is being censured here, the sinner takes his time with it (*permaneo*). He remains till the end, endures. The use of *maneo*, meaning “to spend the night,” was “common in Christian Latin,

⁵⁴ This is the same use of *inexperta* seen in Ausonius 79 (see above).

⁵⁵ A more benign sort of wordplay may also be present. *Incitus* means unmoved, or immovable, the condition of pieces on a board when no further play is to be made. These *inexperta* neophytes may be checkmated.

but it was also established in early popular Latin,” according to Adams (178). The addition of *per-* would intensify the idea of spending an entire night of love-making. A paradox is produced, then, by *diutus*, which means “by day,” or “all day.” Peter’s perfervid imagination concocts a phantom of hasty, excited sex that somehow lasts all night. Adding a thrill for the ecclesiastical reader, *permaneo* means to abide by a rule, or devote oneself to something. His sexual endurance is figured as monastic regulation.

Damianic tergiversation may occur in “*dum illic non feritur*.” The verb *ferio* (to strike, to wound) ostensibly means “to chastise” in the context of priestly impunity. But the word has a sexual application, too. Adams (145–9) includes it among many similar verbs. “One of the largest semantic fields from which metaphors for sexual acts were taken in Latin is that of striking, beating and the like.”⁵⁶ It occurs along with *battuo*, *caedo*, *percido*, *percutio*, *tundo*. Damian’s text may convey a similar sense: “So long as [the sinner] is not fucked.” Such a reading is encouraged by “*illic*” and the relative clause “*ubi acrius dolet*.” Together, they suggest that “*illic*”—rather than a general “in that affair”—is a specific location: “the place where he will feel more severe pain.” In other words, we imagine a persistent, presumptuous pederast, who will do harm to others but remain *inexpertus*, himself, regarding anal intercourse. Rather than *doleo*, the verb *dolet* may be formed from *dolo*, to hew; to cudgel. We are not surprised to learn that *dolo*, too, can be used *in malam partem* (Adams, 149), a sense reinforced by the sexual valance of *acer*: pointed, penetrating, passionate. (Again, we see how the Latin language enables Peter’s

⁵⁶ Other definitions—sting, touch, slay, forge, coin—also circle within the erotic sphere. In the same place, Adams writes, “Metaphors from this semantic area could be freely coined[.]” One must not downplay the creativity of the imagination when forging sexual metaphors. Certainly, some of these ideas persist over time or place and across languages. Some may disappear, only to emerge later or elsewhere. Some must arise without an acknowledged precedent. Certainly Damian was capable of coining such terms.

association of sex with pain; penance, with penetration.) To press this reading, I might add that the word recalls *dolo*, a phallic instrument of violence (spike; a cane-concealed dagger; bee's stinger).⁵⁷

Peter concludes by stating that, as a consequence of leniency, the offender will “*in eo, in quo semel corruit, coenosae obscoenitatis volutabro molliter jacet*” (hurl himself unmanfully into that wallow of filthy obscenity where he first fell). I believe this coda reinforces the sexual tenor of the preceding lines and further focuses attention on the anus. The verb *jaceo* (to cast down) has an erotic charge in this line. (As it does in the poem of Maximianus, where it also occurs in conjunction—twice—with *ferio*.)⁵⁸ Rather than the languor it sometimes denotes, here it communicates energetic action (as does *corrueo*, to rush or tumble together, and *concito*, to put in rapid motion). This is the meaning *iaceo* has in Ascyltus’ jealous lament: *Iacent nunc amatores obligati noctibus totis, et forsitan mutuis libidinibus attriti derident solitudinem meam* (Now those fuckers tumble together entwined the entire night and—it may be—worn out by their mutual lusts they deride my solitude).⁵⁹ A homosexual bent is given to the word by the adverb

⁵⁷ The word *dolus* (evil intent) is operative in this passage regarding the abuse of young men.

⁵⁸ The impotence poem activates the secondary meanings of *jaceo*: to lie idle, indolent, or in ruins.

⁵⁹ The word also appears in homosexual context in Martial’s poetry. Book XI.22 begins,

*Mollia quod nivei duro teris ore Galaesi
Basia, quod nudo cum Ganymede jaces,
Quis negat? hoc nimium'st. Sed sit satis; inguina saltem
Parce fututrici sollicitare manu.*

With a rough mouth you maul snowy Galaesius’ soft lips
As you tussle nude with your Ganymede.
Who denies it? It is too much! Yet let it be enough—
At least spare his cock from the friction of your whorish hand.

The poem’s conclusion is an amusing argument for the advantages of butt-sex:

molliter. This modifies and mollifies the action: he *luxuriates* or *lounges* in lust, passively as a catamite might. Or the phrase *molliter jacet* might mean “he scatters seeds like a fag.” The word *volutabrum*—properly a pigsty, formed from the verb *voluto* (to roll together, to twist about)—hints at this active-idle pederasty, too.⁶⁰ A look at the *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitas* shows us the semantic space the word occupied. Its first three syllables—*voluta*—mean “twisted,” with the same sense of subversion in Latin as in English. For the medieval reader, a *volutabrum* was a *cylindrus*, a cylinder!⁶¹ To the sensitive reader, *volutabrum* could suggest both

Levibus in pueris plus haec quam mentula peccat
et faciunt digiti praecipitantque virum:
inde tragus celeresque pili mirandaque matri
barba, nec in clara balnea luce placent.
Divisit natura marem: pars una puellis,
una viris genita est. Utere parte tua.

The hand sins more than the prick with lightsome boys,
The fingers’ maneuvers hasten manhood,
Whence early pubes, goat-funk, and a beard to amaze a mother,
Hardly pleasing in the baths’ clear light.
Nature has divided man in two. One part for girls,
One for men emerged. Use the part that’s yours.

With Ausonius’ “*Dum dubitat Natura*” we begin to see a tradition of poetic musing on the natural uses of the body. The young man has no integrity; he is seen as as elements—hands, prick, asshole—to use or be used. The youth’s sexual parts are separated: one for women, one for men. The first is certainly the prick, and the second his ever less fetching ass. (The buttocks are also suggested by the image of a body *divisus*.) But isn’t his prick useful for males too? Some men, anyway, and boys younger than himself? The final exhortation to “use his part” introduces further ambiguity. *Utere parte sua* associates the part preferred (boybutt) with the female anatomy: *Utere* is the vocative form of *uterus*. So this also resembles the hermaphrodite poem, although here man’s bisexuality is figured as *bisection*.

⁶⁰ Tertullian (*ad Uxorem* 2.8.7) uses it in a context where the idea of sexual union is stressed: *Ubi caro una, unus et spiritus: simul orant, simul uoluntantur* (Where the flesh is one, the spirit is one: they pray together, they twist together).

⁶¹ The *cylindrus* was a log used to level plowland. It did not, as the name *volutabrum* suggests, rotate.

the instrument and its action. And what does he say about this hog wallow? Damian considers it a “*coenosae obscoenitatis volutabro*.” The adjective *caenosus* means filthy, mucky, but its associations with shit cannot be passed over. *Caenum* is excrement; from *cunio*, to shit.⁶² *Volutabrum*, itself, contains *-lut*, recalling *lutum*, mud, filth. This figural pigsty is a place of shit, the anus. Couple that with *obscoenitas*—this word, itself, puts shit in our mouths, *-coen* evokes both *caenum* (filth) and *cena* (dinner).⁶³ And not only shit. Isidore links obscenity with semen: “*Renes ait Varro dictos quod rivi ab his obsceni humoris nascantur. Nam venae et medullae tenuem liquorem desudant in renibus, qui liquor rursus a renibus calore Venerio resolutus decurrit.*” (The reins, as Varro says, are so called because rivers of the filthy humor are created there. For veins and marrow “sweat” a rarefied liquid into the kidneys, whence it flows, in turn, when released in the heat of intercourse). Resolving the question of *ubi*, the reader may bring before his own eyes the *sanctum sanctorum* where shit and semen are found together. To the

⁶² The *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Woerterbuch* notes that another possible etymon is *inquino*, to beshit. Surely a distinction without difference. The unfortunate phonic similarity with *cunnus* certainly contributed to the revulsion linked to that body part and its functions.

⁶³ This pun is based on a presumed etymological link between the two words. The true root of the word is obscure. Some believe it derives from the Greek theatrical term *skene*, since offensive actions were performed “off stage.” Isodore’s *Etymologies* [X.198] claims, “*Obscenus, impurae libidinis, a vitio Obscorum dictus*” (Obscene: of impure desire, from the vice of the Oscans). What was this vice? An even older example of the same etymology survives in a comment on “*morbus Campanus*,” a Horatian obscurity. “*Campani*,” Porphyri tells us “*qui Osci dicebantur, ore immundi habiti sunt. Unde etiam obscenos dictos putant quasi oscenos*” (The Campanians, who were called Oscans, have a filthy oral custom. Whence it is believed “obscene” comes, as it were “Osci-an). The line can be found in “*Morbus Campanus in Horace Satires 1.5.62*,” by Ortwin Knorr in *The Classical Quarterly* 62.2 (December 2012), PP 869–73. This seems to point to an association of *obscoenitas* with fellatio. Like bugger and lesbian, another example of identifying sexual practices with specific places (Bulgaria, Lesbos). It may be worth noting that the Oscans gave us Atellan farce, known for their verbal obscenity. Does their obscenity consist in what goes into their mouths or out of it?

Latin reader, there was a verbal connection between holy places and pigsties, both are represented by the word *ara* (altar and hog-pen).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In anticipation of those who will object that there is a metrical difference between these words, so they wouldn't be confused, I'll offer a thirteenth-century example of the pun. In his treatise on Aristotelian logic (*Summulae Logicales*), Peter of Spain presents the following syllogism: "*Omnis ara est in templo; stabulum porcorum est ara; ergo stabulum porcorum est in templo*" (Every *ara* (altar) is in a temple; the pig stable is an *ara* (sty); therefore, the pig stable is in the temple). In *Logic and Humour in the Fabliaux: An Essay in Applied Narratology*, Roy Pearcy explains: The joke on *āra* and *āra* appears in the medieval Latin comedy *Babio*, where Fodius makes the deliberately foolish statement, '*Juro sacras per āras*' ['I swear by the holy pigsties'] and later comments on the pretentious Babio's failure to perceive the error, '*Est āra porcorum; respicit āra deos*' ['Sties are for pigs; altars are appropriate for gods']. p. 3. Liberated from the constraints of prosody, perhaps, prose writers like Damian were freer than poets to explore the semantic and metaphoric potentials of the Latin language.

Another notable example of this play on words occurs in Jean de Hauteville Architrenius, where the arch-mourner laments a dissolute priest who abandons Christ for the delights of Venus and Bacchus:

[L]iceat scelus esse locutum
Quod fit inoccultum, vitium facit ipsa loquendi
Materiae sordes, irae furor imperat ori.
Circumscisa minus movet indignatio verba,
Pauperibus dandos redditus inviscerat, et qui
Cuncta dedit nulla contingit portio Christum,
Emungitque bonis ara ventris numinis aram;
Cujus delicias uteri deperdit in utre,
Dum quodin ore sapit stomachi corrumpit Averno.

Which is, in Winthrop Wetherbee's translation:

Be it lawful to speak of crimes that are practiced openly; though the foulness of the subject matter turns speech itself into something vile, yet the force of wrath governs my lips, and indignation evokes words less carefully restrained. He gorges himself on offerings intended for the poor, and no portion is assigned to Christ, who bestowed it all. The pigsty of the belly defrauds the altar of God, and the fruits of this womb are abandoned to the bladder, for what is sweet to the taste is destroyed in the Avernos of the stomach.

De Hauteville presents a semantic alloy, a conference of referents, where each may be the other: belly-womb-pigsty-altar-divinity-uterus-mouth-stomach-hell. Likewise, the verbs used are confused, where simultaneity rather than sequentiality is suggested: *inviscero*; *emungo*; *sapiro*; *corrumpo* (to put in the entrails; to blow one's nose, to cheat; to taste, to smell of, to know; to ruin, spoil, seduce). Besides the poet's penchant for wordplay (*locutum*; *inoccultum*; *ara*, *aram*; *uteri*, *utre*), this passage has bearing on an examination of homoerotic rhetoric. As in Damian,

Finally, there is the question of *semel*. Does it mean “once,” “at one time,” or “once and for all”?

Clearly not the first, for he is said to persist, “*permanere*.” The last would preclude cessation—and redemption. Is the *volutrabrum* a cesspool/asshole from which one cannot extricate oneself?

Damian laments, “*Quidam namque rectores Ecclesiarum circa hoc vitium humaniores forsitan quam expediatur, absolute decernunt propter tres illos gradus, qui superius enumerati sunt, neminem a suo ordine debere deponi*” (How many rectors—more humane perhaps than is expedient—refuse to depose anyone on account of the first three grades of sodomy numbered above).⁶⁵ Instead, “*hos autem solummodo non abnuunt degradari, quos ultimo actu cecidisse constiterit*” (They don’t decline to degrade only those well-known to have fallen into the final action). Again, emphasis on grades and degradation; *ordo* is a synonym of *gradus*. (Besides *rectores*, an allusion to abbatial priority may be made in *superius*.) In fact, even those sinners of the fourth kind sometimes go unpunished:

Unde fit, ut qui cum octo, vel etiam decem alii aequae sordidis in hanc nequitiam lapsus esse cognoscitur, nihilominus in suo ordine permanere videatur. Quae procul dubio impia pietas non vulnus amputat, sed ut augeatur, fomitem

corrupt speech is analogized as sordid sex (“*vitium facit ipsa loquendi /Materiae sorde*”), as if both tongue and cock are sullied with shit. The tongue is also likened to the penis in the locution “*Circumscisa minus movet indignatio verba*” (Indignation excites less roundabout language), where circumscription is figured as circumcision. Although de Hautville does quite not give license to vulgar speech, like Alanus and Damian he employs ambiguity to discuss a touchy topic with humor. Thus, while the *inoccultus* is *locutus*, the *locutio* is an *occultatio*. As in many treatments of lust, moral laxity is imagined as physical slackness. This *ara* error, after all, is used to describe “*Hic puer insolidus et mente et corpore laeso/ Indolis, et teneris animo nervoque solitus, /Quem renum senior lascivia mollit et evi/Ardescens novitas*” (This limp boy, violated in the mind’s and body’s nature, soft and loose in sinew and sensibility. Burning novelty has invaded him, and senile lewdness mollifies his manhood). The object of scorn is paradoxically *puer* and *senex*, either age establishing his sexual inability, his status as *non-vir*.

⁶⁵ Pope Leo IX may have had this passage in mind when he responded to Damian’s offering. “*Sed nos humanius agentes*” (“We being more humane agents”), he began, before suggesting he would grant pardon to all sodomites of the first three kinds. He refused to pursue the matter further.

subministrat; non perpetrati illiciti actus prohibit amaritudinem, sed perpetrandi potius tribuit libertatem.

Therefore, if someone is known to have slipped into into this iniquity, with eight or as it may be ten other equally sordid men, nevertheless he is seen to remain in his order. Without a doubt impious piety does not amputate the wound but causes it to grow by kindling the fire. He does not prevent the bitterness of the illicit act when perpetrated, but rather he allows it freedom to be perpetrated.

Here sin is figured as a wound.⁶⁶ But, despite the image of kindling, Damian does not suggest cauterizing, but amputation. But even that treatment is wanting; the sinners are said to dilate the wound. If we imagine this *vulnus* as the anus (another common trope), we are stumped by how the amputation might work. Instead, Damian imagines these lesions made wider by laxity, and this looseness enables the commission of sodomy. Besides to enlarge or to augment, *augeo* is to extol or worship with offerings. And in *subministro* one wonders how much weight should be given the prefix. Does this mean to give from below? (In Valerius Flaccus' *Agonautica* a horse is said to offer his backside to his captor: *captivaque terga ministrat*.) Is that how he renders his tribute (*tribuit*)? Or are we prompted to question how these superiors become sub-ministers. (The religious quality of the act is stressed throughout—*impia, pietas, augeo, tribuo*) Strangely this neglect and inaction is figured as action.

Damian finds biblical and canonical precedents for enjoining sodomy. He infers its enormity from God's having always dealt it destruction, even before outlawing other vices: *et*

⁶⁶ A curious meta-metaphor is at work. Sin is figured as disease, which is, in turn, likened to a growing fire, which is simultaneously a burning desire and a holocaustic offering. This fire-wound is made to grow. How? With firewood. *Fomes* is tinder or touch-wood, which, I imagine, is another metaphor. In Isidore, this same idea—associating firewood with the penis—occurs with the word *ramale*.

Damian's connection of *fomites* with wounds may be found in its root, *foveo*, which means to warm and to apply compresses to a diseased body part. Compression of another kind may also be in play. *Foveo* refers to masturbation in Tibullus 1.6: “*iam Delia furtim / nescio quem tacita callida nocte fouet*” (Now tonight close-lipped dexterous Delia furtively frigs I-know-not-who).

cum reliquis vitiis necdum per legale paeceptum frena posuerat, jam hoc districtae ultionis animadversione damnabat. (And while He had not yet placed the bridle on future vices by legal precept, he was already damning this with severe and vengeful punishment). Initially, one presumes he is referring to God's actions against the cities of the plain before the giving of the laws to Moses, but Damian prefers to focus on another instance of divine response against sexual irregularity: onanism.

Nam, ut taceamus, quod Sodomam et Gomorrhā, duas videlicet egregias civitates, omnesque finitimas regiones, misso coelitus sulphure et igne subvertit; Onan Iudei filium propter hoc nefarium scelus immatura morte percussit, teste Scriptura, quae dicit: "Sciens Onan non sibi nasci filios, introiens ad uxorem fratris sui, semen fundebat in terram, ne liberi fratris nomine nascerentur: et idcirco percussit eum Dominus, eo quod rem detestabilem faceret." In lege quoque dicitur: "Qui dormierit cum masculo coitu femineo, uterque operati sunt nefas, morte moriantur; sanguis eorum sit super eos."

For there is no need to mention that He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, two plainly egregious cities, and all the regions thereabouts, through fire and brimstone sent from heaven. On account of this unspeakable crime, He struck down Onan the son of Judah with a premature death, as Scripture attests, which says: "But Onan, knowing any children born would not be his, when entering in to his brother's wife he would pour out his semen on the ground, so that children would not be born in his brother's name. And because of this the Lord slew him, because he had done a detestable thing." In the Law it is said: "He who sleeps with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them."

The shadow of unspeakability in Damian's passage (*taceamus, nefarium, nefas*) is contradicted by its insistence on divine or scriptural vocality (*dicit, dicitur, teste, detestabilem*). Damian creates an even stranger contradiction. Onan is punished for a crime *ex post facto*, for having done something he could not know would displease God.⁶⁷ To justify this, Damian cites Leviticus—and a law directed at a crime which Onan does not commit: sex with men. Since

⁶⁷ He is operating under some system of laws—inaugurated by some man or other god—which dictates that a widow's offspring are heirs to her first husband.

Damian understands onanism as masturbation, he organizes it with homosex under his rubric of *sodomia*. He does not recognize that Onan is guilty of neither. Even as Damian takes great pains to devise a taxonomy of sodomy, he allows it to embrace other sexual sins. We must also question whether Damian thinks priests should be punished for these iniquities before his strictures are promulgated, in which case he is as premature as God.

Damian also offers non-scriptural corroboration for his opinion. (Elsewhere in the text he questions the authority of canon law on sodomy, either because it is inconsistent or too lenient.) He cites a letter from Pope Gregory—to the suggestively named Passivus. The pope writes that a sinful cleric should only be ordained “*ei si nulla ei crimina, quae per legis sacra regulam morte multata sunt, obviant* (if no crimes meriting death under the old law are exposed). In this rather imprecise caveat Damian finds clear condemnation of homosexuality:

Ecce hic aperte colligitur, quia quisquis vir cum viro labitur, quod nimirum scelus, ut supra docuimus, per vetustae legis sententiam morte multatur, etiamsi honestis moribus polleat, si psalmodiae studio ferveat, si in amore orationis enitescat, et omnino religiosam vitam sub approbatae famae testimonio ducat

Lo, by this it is openly concluded that whatever man slips with man, which crime surely, as we showed above, through the sentence of the old law is to be punished with death—howsoever he abounds in moral honesty, or burns with zeal for psalmody, or shines in his love of prayer, or leads a religious life according to the testimony of all.

It is not at all clear (*apertus*) that Gregory means to infer homosexuality; he only mentions Old Testament capital crimes.⁶⁸ Yet Damian insists on this certainty; in the same paragraph he writes “*patet profecto*,” “*sine dubio*,” “*non ambigitur*,” and “*luce ergo clarius*” (it is assuredly evident;

⁶⁸ The ones which might be discovered in such a case include idolatry, blasphemy, sorcery, rape, incest, adultery, bestiality, and, yes, sodomy.

without doubt; it is not debateable; therefore clearer than day). His judgment, then, cannot be opposed. But the old law demands death, and Damian only denies promotion.⁶⁹

Mixed Metaphors

Beside verbal equivocation, Damian also entertains ambiguity at the level of image, metaphor, and allegory. For example, in his explanation of the Pauline injunction against same-sex desire (Romans 1), Damian equates homosexuality with madness and the loss of one's senses (figured as deafness and blindness):

Quis enim surda aure praetereat, imo quis non medullitus contremiscat, quod de talibus Apostolus, velut tuba vehemens, intonat, dicens: "Tradidit illos Deus in desideria cordis eorum, in immunditiam, ut contumeliis afficiant corpora sua in semetipsis. . . et mercedem, quam oportuit, erroris sui, in semetipsos recipientes: et sicut non probaverunt habere Deum in notitia, tradidit illos Deus in reprobum sensum, ut faciant quae non convenient.

Who can turn a deaf ear or, more to the point, who does not tremble through and through at the words that Paul, like a mighty trumpet, blasts at such as these? "God abandoned them to their hearts' desire and to the practices with which they dishonor their own bodies... And since they refused to see that it was rational to acknowledge God, God has abandoned them to their depraved senses to do that which was reprehensible."

This leads Damian to a treatment of the biblical story of Sodom, whose mention of blindness he equates with sexual depravity. In this he is following the example of Ambrose, who in "The Flight from the World" also links the blindness of the sodomites with a sort of spiritual blindness.⁷⁰ Of Genesis 19, Damian writes:

Cum justo Loth vim vehementissime facerent, jamque prope essent ut effringerent fores. Et ecce, inquit Scriptura, miserunt manum viri, et

⁶⁹ Damian uses "mors" and its derivatives ("*mortalis*," "*morior*") ten times in this paragraph, including the biblical "*morte moriantur*" (they shall die the death). Leviticus uses this formulation for the causes above.

⁷⁰ See *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*, by Michael Carden p.145.

introduxerunt ad se Loth, clauseruntque ostium, et eos, qui foris erant percutserunt cecitate a minimo usque ad maximum, ita ut ostium invenire non possent.

With that, they pressed hard against Lot, moving in closer to break down the door. But (says Scripture) the men put out their hands, pulled Lot inside with them, and closed the door; at the same time they struck the men at the entrance, from the least to the greatest, with such a blindness that they were unable to find the doorway. (Payer)

Payer gets some of the possible sexual flavor of the biblical “*vim vehementissime facerent*” (they pressed hard against Lot). Note that the angels put forth their hands to Lot. This “laying on of hands” and its uncomfortable correlative in cloistered mutual masturbation have already been put in play. Moreover, the biblical passage is overdetermined in its emphasis on the door (*fores...ostium...foris... ostium*); a reader so attuned will appreciate the idea’s sexual potential. The whole episode can be read as an allegory of an attempted male rape, a vivid (and necessary) presentation of an act which goes unnamed in Genesis.⁷¹ Damian runs with this in his expansive allegorical interpretation of the incident:

Sodomitae ergo ad angelos conantur violenter irrumpere, cum immundi homines ad Deum tentant per sacri ordinis officia propinquare. Sed hi profecto caecitate percutiuntur, quia justo Dei judicio in tenebras interiores cadunt; ita ut nec ostium invenire praevaleant, quia a Deo peccando divisi, unde ad eum revertuntur ignorant. Qui enim non per humilitatis, sed per arrogantiae, et tumoris anfractus ad Deum accedere gestiunt, patet profecto, quia unde ingressonis aditus pateat non agnoscent; vel etiam quia ostium Christus est, sicut ipse dicit: “Ego sum ostium.” Qui Christum peccatis exigentibus amittunt, quasi intrare coelestium civium habitaculum non possint, ostium non inveniunt.

Consequently, sodomites attempt violently to break in on angels when impure men attempt to approach God through the offices of holy orders. Surely, they are struck with blindness, because by the just decree of God they fall into interior darkness. They are thus unable to find the door because in their separation from God by sin they do not know how to return to him. One who

⁷¹ How otherwise are we to understand what is being punished? Despite centuries of consensus, Genesis was not always interpreted as a story of same-sex desire. Early Jewish and Christian exegetes read it as a story of presumption and pride. Many contemporary critics have attempted to recuperate the biblical episode as an indictment of inhospitality.

tries to reach God by the tortuous road of arrogance and conceit, rather than by the path of humility, will certainly fail to recognize the entrance that is obviously right before him, or even that the door is Christ, as he himself says: “I am the door.” Those who lose Christ through the demands of sin, never find the gate that leads to the dwelling of the heavenly host.

The language of approach and entrance (however thwarted) abounds: *propinquus, accedo, intro, aditus, ingressio, interior*,⁷² and the more violent *irrumpo* and *percutio*. (That is, to draw near, to approach, to enter, access, entrance, interior, to break in, and to thrust through.) All these have obvious erotic dimensions.⁷³ *Irrumpo*, in particular, strikes this chord. In his section on “‘Cut, split, penetrate,’ and the like,” Adams (150–51) notes that *rumpo* appears often in sexual contexts.⁷⁴ For example, Catullus (80.7–8) excoriates Gellius, “*clament Victoris rupta miselli / ilia, et emulso labra notata sero*” (They claim that poor Victor’s balls are burst, and your lips are marked by milked-out cum). Most of these instances deal with eruptions of the *membrum, ilia, latus, or tentigo* (cock, groin, loins, or hard-on). Damian speaks of irruption. This seems to be sexual attack, *ruptus* as *raptus*. In the visual similarity between *irrumpere* and *irrumere*, oral rape may also be imagined. The sodomitical aspect of the action may be revealed in the

⁷² The expression “*in tenebras interiores cadunt*” is an example of Damian’s concept of crime-as-punishment. The sinners are said to “fall into interior darkness” as a result of having fallen into another black interior. Damian emphasizes “going in” through the repetition of the phoneme *in* in *homines, ordinis, propinquare, interieurs, ingressiones, invenire, intrare, possint*, and *inveniunt*.

⁷³ *Anfractus*, used by Damian to mean “a tortuous route” here, can have the sense of *ambages*, circumlocution. He may signal that his meaning is veiled and may, like the door, go unrecognized. It also continues the idea of rupture: *fractus* is broken, fractured. *Infractus*, which is like *anfractus*, means effeminate. (The Sodomites are said to *effringerent fores*, break open the doors, in the preceding passage.)

⁷⁴ *Dirrumpo* and *corrumpo* have the same flexibility. In the same place Adams notes that *diviso* means *pedico*. A bawdy exchange in Plautus’ *Aulularia* turns on the confusion between sharing goods and splitting someone’s ass. A deviant *diviso* may also appear in this passage of the *Liber*, apropos of God: *quia a Deo peccando divisi* (because in sinning they are separated from God). However, the preposition *a* might indicate the agent of the verb, rather than the indirect object: rent asunder by God in sinning.

repetition of *pateo* (to lie open or exposed): *patet profecto, quia unde ingressio aditus pateat non agnoscunt* (It's certainly evident that, although the alley of ingress lies open, they will not recognize it). Pierrugues offers a line from the *Priapeia*: *Licet querare, nec tibi tener puer patebit ullus* (Lament if you like, no soft boy will open himself to you) where the erotic sense is patent. Another instance is even apter for our reading of Damian. *Priapeia* 52 warns a culprit:

iam primum stator hic libidinosus
alternis et eundo et exeundo
portam te faciet patentiorum.

First the lecherly watchman,
Entering and exiting in turn,
Will force your door wide open.

Pateo is also “to be available” and “to offer access.” And this sense of access occurs in *aditus*. From *ad + ire*, this is a way of going to or into; an entrance or avenue. (It is the source of English *adit*, the horizontal access to a mine.) *Adeo* entails another meaning relevant to my understanding: it is to approach a temple or altar. This asshole is access to God and, insofar as the Gospel declares “*nemo venit ad Patrem nisi per me*” (No one comes to the Father but through me). And Damian forces the analogy by quoting Christ’s “I am the door.” Lot’s door, then, is the site of sexual aggression, figured as the available accessible asshole, which is the path to God, which is also Christ, himself.

Few recent critics have remarked on the peculiarity of this passage. Damian equates the Sodomites’ intrusion with the seeking of divine office by sodomitical clerics, but the sexual image of the door cannot be ignored. David Lorenzo Boyd off-handedly remarks without further comment that, in Damian’s allegorical reading of Scripture, “the attempt of a sodomite to secure or maintain an ecclesiastical appointment is nothing less than an attempt to sodomize God

Himself!”⁷⁵ On the other hand, Larry Scanlon gives the passage the attention its peculiarity deserves. Elaborating on Boyd’s insight, he writes, “This scandalous possibility can hardly be considered inadvertent [. . .] Peter’s reading of the scene in front of Lot’s house makes sodomitical desire the literal equivalent to the desire of the original Sodomites to penetrate Lot’s door.”⁷⁶ In a previous passage the angels are said to be the Father and Son, so Peter invites the reader to imagine a sexual attempt on the godhead.⁷⁷ This fumbling about the door is equated with anal sex:

Quod ergo illic dicitur: “Percusserunt eos qui foris erant caecitate;” hoc Apostolus manifeste declarat, cum dicit: “Tradidit eos Deus in reprobum sensum;” et quod illic subjungitur: “Ut ostium invenire non possent;” hoc etiam patenter exponit, cum ait: “Ut faciant quae non convenient.” Ac si diceret: ut intrare tentent, unde non debent.

Now the Apostle clearly explains what he previously said, viz. “They struck the men who were outside the house with blindness,” when he states, “God abandoned them to their reprobate ideas [senses].” He obviously comments on the following phrase: “And they could not find the doorway,” when he continues, “To do that which is reprehensible,” as if he were saying that they were trying to enter a door that was closed to them. (Blum, 14)

The “door” as anus is made even more explicit further on where he says that “to find the door” is “to do what is unseemly” (*Ut ostium invenire non possent*” *hoc etiam patenter exponit, cum ait:*

⁷⁵ Boyd, p. 63.

⁷⁶ Larry Scanlon, “Unmanned Men and Eunuchs of God: Peter Damian’s *Liber Gormorrhianus* and the Sexual Politics of Papal Reform” in *New Medieval Literatures*, Volume Two (Oxford University Press, 1998), p 62.

⁷⁷ There is similar confusion, too, when (of contemporary sodomites) he writes that “*ad Deum tentant*,” which—because *tentare* is separated from its main verb *propinquare*—invites initial misreading as “they touch” (especially since the angels’ *hands* precede it) or “tempt” God. This sort of syntactical confusion occasions much of the ambiguity in Damian.

“*Ut faciant quae non convenient.*”). As if this were not enough he adds, “They try to enter where they ought not” (*Ac si diceret: ut intrare tentent, unde non debent*).⁷⁸

The entire passage culminates in a comic image of sexual frustration:

Qui enim indignus ordine ad sacri altaris officium conatur irrumpere, quid aliud quam relicto januae limine, per immeabilem parietis obicem nititur introire? Et quia liber pedibus non patet ingressus, hi tales dum sibi spondent ad sacrarium posse pertingere, sua praesumptione frustrari coguntur potius in exteriori vestibulo remanere. El frontem quidem possunt in sacrae Scripturae saxa percutere, sed per divinae auctoritatis aditum nequaquam permittuntur intrare; atque dum ingredi, quo non sinuntur, attentant, nihil aliud faciunt, quam obiectum parietem inaniter palpant.

To be sure, one who is unworthy of holy orders and tries to break into the service of the altar does the same as he who abandons the obvious gateway and tries to enter through some impassible obstacle of the wall. Since such persons, moreover, are denied free access, while promising themselves that they will enter the sanctuary, they are forced to remain instead in the forecourt, frustrated in their presumption. They can go ahead and bang their head against the rocks of Holy Scripture, but they will never be able to enter by way of this divine authority. And while attempting to break in where they are not permitted, they can do nothing but vainly grope their way along the hidden walls.

⁷⁸ In making the association of the door with the anus, Damian may be following the *De Officiis* (I.XVIII.78) of Ambrose:

Nonne igitur ipsa natura est magistra verecundiae? Cuius exemplo modestia hominum (quam a modo scientiae quid deceret appellatam arbitror) id quod in hac nostri corporis fabrica abditum reperit, operuit et texit; ut ostium illud quod ex transverso faciendum in arca illa Noe iusto dictum est; in qua vel Ecclesiae, vel nostri figura est corporis: per quod ostium egeruntur reliquiae ciborum.

That is, in the translation of H. De Romestin:

Is not nature herself then a teacher of modesty? Following her example, the modesty of men, which I suppose is so called from the mode of knowing what is seemly, has covered and veiled what it has found hid in the frame of our body; like that door which Noah was bidden to make in the side of the ark; wherein we find a figure of the Church, and also of the human body, for through that door the remnants of food were cast out.

See *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Volume X. St. Ambrose: Select works and letters*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, The Christian Literature Company (New York)1896, p. 14.

The equation of the altar with the sexual parts is sacrilegious enough, but Damian goes further (too far?): he immediately reminds us that the door is Christ (*vel etiam quia ostium Christus est, sicut ipse dicit: 'Ego sum ostium'*). In an image where office is an orifice, the longing for clerical orders is likened to a sodomy whose object and site is Christ, himself.

The Bible as *Vas Improprium*

Beside the appeal to verbal equivocation or metaphoric ambiguity, Damian resorts to a more troublesome sort of misreading, a type for which we have been prepared by his imagination's melding of *sanctum*, *rectum*, and *Christum*. His citation of Scripture—ostensibly intended to corroborate and authorize his anti-sodomitical rant—sometimes invite an equivocal reading.⁷⁹ This puts Damian in danger of committing blasphemy. It may be no accident that—as many critics point out—Damian's neologism “*sodomia*” is modeled on “*blasphemia*,” a connection he, himself, makes when he treats the severity of one by comparing it to the other:

Illud etiam addimus, quia si pessima est blasphemia, nescio, in quo sit melior sodomia. Illa enim facit hominem errare; ista perire. Illa a Deo animam dividit; diabolo ista conjungit. Illa de paradyso ejicit; ista in tartarum mergit. Illa mentis oculos caecat; in ruinae voraginem ista praecipitat.

I may also add that if blasphemy is a terrible thing, I am not aware that sodomy is any better. The former indeed causes a man to err; the latter brings him to

⁷⁹ In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes the versatility of Latin, as vehicle for sacred and profane meaning:

In the further development of humorous Latin literature, parodic doublets of every ecclesiastical cult and teaching were created—the so-called *parodia sacra*, “sacred parody,” one of the most peculiar and least understood manifestations of medieval literature. There is a considerable number of parodical liturgies (The Liturgy of the Drunkards,” “The Liturgy of the Gamblers), parodies of Gospel readings, of the most sacred prayers (the Lord's Prayer, the *Ave Maria*), of litanies, hymns, psalms, and even Gospel sayings. See “Introduction,” p. 14.

perdition. The one separates the soul from God; the other joins it to the devil. The former expels one from heaven; the latter buries him in hell. The one blinds the eyes of the soul; the other hurls one into the abyss of ruin.

It is noteworthy that in this section Damian attempts to excuse himself from accusations of (potentially sinful) verbal excess, vis., too vehement reproof or subtlety of argument. (These are related to, but not the same as, the verbal peccadilloes enumerated in Letter 57.) Once again, it is as if he recognizes the dangers of the tongue and equates them with the uses of the member which may likewise be inordinate or out-of-place. Clement of Alexandria makes a tacit equation: “It is said that Anacharsis the Scythian, while asleep, held his secret parts with his left hand, and his mouth with his right, to intimate that both ought to be mastered, but that it was a greater thing to master the tongue than voluptuousness.”⁸⁰ Besides the morphological and metaphoric conjunction of tongue and penis, we must not forget that the aural and scribal similarity between *verba* and *verpa* promotes the association. In this exculpation, Damian almost commits another error—prideful presumption—for he compares himself in one sentence to Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. He immediately retracts the imputation. But he does not excise it from the letter. A need to expose himself demands that the sign of his sin remain.⁸¹ In this passage we see the (by now) familiar tics of Damian—sexually suggestive vocabulary⁸² and sexually suggestive imagery, overall.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Stromata* 5.viii, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2. Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*. Ed Roberts and Donaldson, Edinburgh (1885) p.247.

⁸¹ And, remember, it is just such vanity that the earliest exegetes identified as the sin of Sodom. Damian is dangerously close to outing himself.

⁸² *Conjugo, mergo, perire, oculos* (with embedded *culos*), *caeco, ejico, tartarum* and *vorago*.

⁸³ The conjugation, (sub)merging, ejection/ejaculation, and precipitation into holes or throats.

“*Si videris fratrem tuum inique agentem, et non corripueris eum,*” Damian paraphrases Ezechiel 3.18, “*sanguinem ejus de manu tua requiram*” (If you see your brother acting unfitly, and do not chastise him, I will require his blood from your hand.)⁸⁴ In this way, he rationalizes his denunciation; what seems to benefit another is really in his own interest. The text, itself, is unclear, and it is made more so if we allow for a suggestive ambiguity. *Ago* we’ve seen already as metaphor for sex. (Although in his context *ago* is not metaphor but circumlocution.) *Inique* occurs in place of the expected word, *nequiter*, vilely. It conveys a range of meanings, starting with unequally, as when a contest is between opponents of different sizes, or when something is pursued immoderately. It might describe the surprised sinner: unwilling, impatient. Or Damian himself: spiteful, envious. *Corripueris* prescribes the corrective action to be taken: You will reprove him, or accuse him. But that does not obviate its primary sense—to seize, to take hold of—which is reinforced by the presence of *manus*. The intruder is to take possession of the culprit; the root of *corripio* is *rapio*. The idea of boy rape lurks within the word: *corri-puer-is*. *Corripueris* easily morphs into *corruperis*, you will have corrupted him, with all the shadings of the word: to spoil, stain, seduce, destroy. The eagle-eyed Damian is to carry off his own Ganymede. Or perhaps jerk him off? Is that why Damian’s hand must pay the penalty?

⁸⁴ Ezechiel 3:18 actually says: “*Si dicente me ad impium morte morieris non adnuntiaveris ei neque locutus fueris ut avertatur a via sua impia et vivat ipse impius in iniquitate sua morietur sanguinem autem eius de manu tua requiram*” (If in my saying to the wicked man, You shall die, you neither inform him nor have spoken so he may turn from his wicked path, and this wicked man lives in his iniquity, he shall die, but I will deem his blood on your hands). Galatians 6:1 may lurk behind Damian’s version: “*si praeoccupatus fuerit homo in aliquo delicto vos qui spiritales estis huiusmodi instruite in spiritu lenitatis considerans te ipsum ne et tu tempteris*” (If a man is caught in some offence, instruct him, in a spirit of gentleness, reflecting on yourselves lest you be tempted, too.)

And what exactly is the penalty? *Sanguis*. Damian connects blood and semen throughout.⁸⁵

In Chapter XX Damian displays his knowledge of contemporary medicine: “*Verumtamen si et hujus vitii naturam studeamus solerter inspicere et physicorum dicta ad memoriam revocare, invenimus seminis fluxum ex sanguinis origine procreatuum. Sicut enim agitatione ventorum aqua maris in spumam convertitur, ita contrectatione genitalium sanguis in humorem seminis excitatur.*” (In fact, if we also carefully study the nature of this vice and recall the statements of physical scientists, we find that the discharge of semen has its origin from blood. For as by agitation of the winds seawater is converted into foam, so also blood is turned into liquid semen by handling the genitals).⁸⁶ Damian dismisses the idea that blood is metaphor for murder. Rather,

⁸⁵ Not without precedent. Petronius writes: “*desiderium meum, tu voluptas mea, nunquam finies hunc ignem, nisi sanguine*” (My desire, my delight, you will never quench this fire, except with blood), where the ardent wish of the speaker is not death but sex.

⁸⁶ This seemingly dry statement, is in fact quite sticky. The line is awash in watery words: *seminis* (twice), *fluxum*, *sanguinis* (twice), *aqua*, *maris*, *spumam*, *humorem*. *Spuma* is more than sea-spray. Spume is sperm, and Damian alludes here to classical myth where the birth of Aphrodite results from castrated Saturn’s *aphros*, foam or sperm, cast into the ocean. This notion may be emphasized if we see a pun in *aqua maris*, man fluid, as it were. *Aqua* stands for cum in the Priapeia: *si carpseris uvam, cur aliter sumas, hospes, habebis aquam* (if you snatch my grapes, stranger, you’ll take my water another way). The Vulgate, too, allows for an association of water with semen. Numbers 24:7 reads, “*fluet aqua de situla eius et semen illius erit in aquas multas*” (Water will flow from his ewer, and his seed will be in many waters). This passage might make a medieval cleric uncomfortable, since *situla* was the word for the vessel that holds holy water. Damian may have also associated the two from reading Isiah 23:3: “*In aquis multis semen Nili messis fluminis fruges eius*” (Semen on the waters of the river Nile was your great profit). This poem has a strange connection to the Venus myth, for the next verse has this prosopopoeia:

ait enim mare
fortitudo maris dicens non parturivi et
non peperi et non enutrivi iuvenes

The sea speaks,
The strength of the sea, saying I do not labor
Nor do I bring forth nor nurture young men

he says, “*manus vestrae sanguine plena sunt, de peste immunditiae dictum esse videatur*” (‘Your hands are covered with blood,’ seems to be said of the to the plague of uncleanness). I imagine that the messy aftermath of masturbation is in his mind. Likewise, when he considers Lev. 20:13 (“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them”).

Damian’s elision of blood with semen is especially problematic. He repeatedly returns to man’s thirst for the blood of Christ. Damian’s conflation of holy desire with sexual depravity is by now an established trope.

As if to confuse us further, Damian later adds, “*Maledictus, qui prohibet gladium suum a sanguine.*” That is, “Cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood.” Surely, considering the previous discussion of the seminal character of blood and the perennial use of sword as metonym for penis, this can be understood as, “Cursed be he who holds off his cock from cum.” Of course, none of this is made any less lubricious by what follows:

[H]ortaris me ut gladius linguae meae in taciturnitatis theca repositus, et sibimet pereat, dum offendit rubiginem contrahit; et aliis non proficiat, dum culpas prave viventium non configit. Gladium quippe a sanguine prohibere, est correctionis verbum a carnalis vitae percussione compescere. De quo gladio rursum dicitur: “Ex ore enim gladius ex utraque parte acutus exibat.”

[A]re you suggesting the sword of my tongue should fail, put away in a scabbard of silence and rusting away, while failing to be profitable for others because it does not thrust through the faults of those who live wicked lives? Surely, grudging blood to one’s sword is tantamount to checking the blow of correction from striking one who lives by the flesh. Of this same sword it is also said: “Out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.”⁸⁷

But I might render it:

If for *agitatio ventorum* we read *ventrum*, then it is the agitation of wombs that converts man’s fluid into foam.

⁸⁷ Blum, p. 50.

Do you urge me that my tongue-sword [note the conjunction of these two metonyms for penis] lie in the sheath of silence, to contract offensive gonorrhea, of no use to others, since it does not transfix [also, join together] the faults of those living in depravity. Certainly, to hold back the sword from blood is to restrain the voice of correction from penetrating a life of the flesh. Of this sword, again, it is said: “In truth, the sharp flesh-sword withdrew from his mouth, as well as the other part.”

The emphasis is clearly on cock; the *gladius* is named four times. In *gladius linguis* he couples two metaphors for *mentula*, rehearsing the sin he condemns. The *lingua* not only refers to the phallic tongue, but Damian’s other instrument of communication, the pen. The cock pops up again in the image of its case: *theca*. This is a sheath, a pencilcase, and a cunt.⁸⁸ The *theca* is a *vagina*—both are “sheath”—or asshole, in fact any receptacle for the penis. It was also the word for pencase, or inkwell: *theca calamaria*. Since *calamus* is a parologue for prick, this item, too, suggests a box for the penis. Each implement—sword, pen, and penis—has its repository; it is *theca* for each. Damian bristles at the idea that his tongue should occupy its case; that his tongue should be placed back (*repositus*) in a vagina. *Pono*, to place or put in, can be read *in obscenis*. And *repositus*, which we expect to signal repose, instead implies repeated action, cunnilingus. Speech is often figured as homosexual activity in Damian.⁸⁹ Here silence is heterosexual sodomy, which conjures the spectre of disease for Damian. *Rubigo* is rust, which attacks idle swords. It is also a disease of certain reeds and grains, so (besides *gladius*) the unspeakable, unspoken *calamus* may have prompted its use here. “*Robigo*,” writes Servius, “autem genus est vitii, quo culmi pereunt.” (Rust is a type of blight that kills the grain stalks.) More relevant here

⁸⁸ As the “scabbard” of his tongue, it must also be Damian’s mouth. The analogy between the mouth and the female genitalia is well-established, but not one we expect to encounter in Damian. If the mouth is a vagina, then it is the natural unnatural place for a prick.

⁸⁹ As here with *percusso*, *repono*, *configo* (pierce, pound; put back in; to join, to pierce). Words that indicate inaction or languor can also have erotic potential. *Pereo*, to disappear or perish, functions this way in the sentence, associated with the languid *lingua* and *inguina*.

than its connection to agriculture, is its medical meaning. In the same place Servius (1.51) offers, “*Nam proprie robigo est, ut Varro dicit, vitium obscenae libidinis, quod ulcus vocatur. Id autem abundantia et superfluitate humoris nasci solet, quae graece satyriasis dicitur.*”⁹⁰ (Rightly, as Varro says, robigo is the blight of obscene lust, which is called chancroid. It is the same abundance and superfluity of the genitive spirit, which the Greeks term satyriasis.”⁹¹ In *robigo*, Damian has managed again to find a word with triple application: for sword, pen, and penis. It is iron rust, leaf blotch, and genital fistula.

“*Gladium quippe a sanguine prohibere,*” Damian expands and explains, “*est correctionis verbum a carnalis vitae percussione compescere. De quo gladio rursum dicitur: “Ex ore enim gladius ex utraque parte acutus exibat.*” (To keep the sword from blood is to suppress a chastising sermon’s from striking a fleshly life). This seeming definition (x is y) is not entirely helpful. Damian explains one metaphor with another. The two verbs have a likeness. *Prohibeo* is to repress, restrain, or prohibit. *Compesco* is to check, restrain, repress. Much of a muchness. This is not similarity but synonymy, identity. The operative idea is suppression. This is Damian’s mission, the suppression of sodomy. Insofar as it resembles sexual repression—not psychological burying, but semen retention—his crusade is like this sexual practice. His pleasure is to stop pleasure, his own and others’.

⁹⁰ Servius is commenting on a verse from Vergil’s *Georgics* (1.150–53): “*ut mala culmos /esset robigo segnisque horreret in aruis /carduus*” (Blight diseased the stalks, so thistle bristled sluggish in the fields). See *Servii Grammatici*, edd. Georgius Thilo and Hermannus Hagen, Teubner (Leipzig) 1881.

⁹¹ Ulcers of the groin are different from satyriasis, which does not mean priapism here. This is what the Greeks called tubercular elephantiasis, from the horn-like tubercles that appear on the forehead. Ulcers do appear in cases of genital chancroid, a sexually transmitted disease. See *Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Epidemiology, Pathology, Diagnosis, and Treatment*, edd. Kenneth A. Borchardt, Michael A. Noble, CRC Press, Boca Raton (1997) pp. 59–74.

Correctio's primary meaning is not unlike that of its English descendant. It is an amendment, a change made for the sake of improvement. It developed the sense of physical encouragement and, eventually, punishment. By the twelfth century it had come to stand for *flagellation*; and *corrigia* for whip.⁹² Damian, of course, promulgated flagellation as a penitentiary practice, and the connection of *correctio* with *corrigia* may have been alive then. The idea of *correcting* sin becomes increasingly strong in the *Liber*. We do well to imagine he means verbal warnings intended to reform *and* lashes meant to inforce. The excitement one is to feel may be signalled by the *rectio* in *correctio*. (*Correctio* and *erectio* both rise from *rego*, to make straight or to govern.) This dichotomy may be embodied in this very line. Damian resists those who would “*correctionis verbum a carnalis vitae percussione compescere*,” restrain the piercing stroke of the correcting word.” Blum translates the expression as “checking the blow of correction from striking,” erasing the curious “*verbum*” in favour of a transferred “*percussione*,” which is now both “the blow” and “striking.”⁹³ But is he wrong? His version makes more sense, for the metaphor is awkward.⁹⁴ Perhaps he saw in *verbum* a connection to *verber*, as I am sure Damian did. A *verber* is a rod, a stick, or a scourge made from small cords, in other words, a *corrigia*. In the first two, we have analogues for the prick, which links that tool with an instrument of

⁹² Lewis and Short claims it originates in *corrigo*. Isidore, on the other hand, says, “[C]orrigia are named from leather (*corium*) or from binding (*colligatio*), as if the word were *colligia*.” (Etym., p. 392) One inclined to etymologize like Isidore, could derive it from *corium rigeo* (to make leather stiff). Besides whips, it referred to shoelaces, other sorts of ligature, and barbers' strops. In Reinardus Lupus, one dangles at the hip of the barber and is stropped to prepare to “shave” the fox. The impending surgery is linked to clerical tonsure, castration, and circumcision.

⁹³ Payer: “to hold in the word of correction from striking.”

⁹⁴ I am comfortable with a metaphorical tongue piercing [one with] a carnal life, whose entry point would be the ass or mouth. (Considering the focus on orality, probably the latter.)

punishment as well as pleasure. *Verpa (mentula)* does the same. If this *verber* is a subtextual seme, it amplifies connections between the tongue, prick, whip, sword, and word. An electron cloud of meanings might link all of these at one time.

Damian flirts with confusion stemming from the rhetorical sense of *correction*. *Correctio* is a figure of speech that signifies the recalling of a word in order to use another in its place. More often, however, it entails immediate and emphatic self-correction (either accidental or deliberate). What “loaded” word is he withdrawing here? Are we to make anything of Damian’s mis-scription of “*ex ore*” for the Scriptural “*de ore*” here and a little further on in “*ex utraque parte*”? Is this merely a mistake explained by “*exibat*” (This final word is mistaken, as well; the Vulgate has *exiebat*, but Damian may want to suggest “exhibit” (already in the writer’s mind because of *prohibeo* in the previous section).

To further illustrate the power of these associations (correction, pruning, swords, and reeds, *inter alia*) for Peter we can look at Letter 54, where he explains Isaiah II, “*Et conflabunt gladios suos in vomeres et lanceas suas in falces*” (They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks). Peter writes:

Impatientibus sane correctiones quasi gladii sunt, sed si volunt ut hi gladii vertantur in falces, hirsuta vitiorum suorum dumeta, quibus horrent, permutantur in messes. [. . .] E]t gladii in vomeres et lanceae conflantur in falces. Nam dum impatiens quispiam per disciplinam mitior factus tanquam planusager increpationis cultro proscinditur, deinde suavi semine sanctae praedicationis aspergitur, et sic demum fecunda bonorum operum fruge vestitur, huic scilicet et gladii facti sunt vomeres et lanceae convertuntur in falces; quia qui reprehendi prius tanquam gladio percuti deputabat, nunc et vomerem sacrae doctrinae libenter sustinet, ut fruges ferat et falcem supernae misionis exspectat, ut horrei coelestis promptuarium repleat.

Clearly, for ill-tempered men corrections⁹⁵ are like swords. But if they wish these swords to be turned into sickles, the prickly thorns of their vices with which they

⁹⁵ A variant text reads *correptiones* for *correctiones*. In their secondary senses they are synonymous; both mean reproofs. If we except the former reading we may indulge its primary sense, to lay hold of, from *corripio* (to seize; via *rapio*, to rape). Perhaps relevant to Damian’s

bristle, must be changed into standing grain [. . .] and “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning forks.” For when an impatient man, made meeker by discipline, is broken up like a level field by the plowshare of correction, and is then planted with the gentle seed of holy preaching, he is finally filled with an abundant harvest of good works. For such a man, swords are made into plowshares and spears are turned into pruning knives. For he who first allows himself to be reprimanded, as if pierced by a sword, will then willingly accept the plowshare of sacred doctrine that he may bear fruit, and await the pruning knife of the heavenly harvest that he might fill the larder of God’s granary.

In Adams’ section on agricultural language as sexual metaphor, the author notes that *vomer* and *falx* are well attested metonyms for *mentula*.⁹⁶ What’s more, he takes the opportunity to show how this particular analogy survived into the middle age. Matthew of Vendome, he tells us, uses the same language in a sexually ambiguous way in *Milo*:

The above use of *vomer* was taken up much later by Matthew of Vendome, *Milo* 184 ‘*cultoris uacat egra manu qui uimina nulla / falce metit, nullo uomere tangit humum*’ (Milo is accused of not consummating his marriage; *humum* suggests the *cunnus*). Agricultural metaphors enjoyed a vogue in Medieval Latin. For *falx*, which also must be a double entendre here, see the satire *De Monacho Quodam ‘misisti falcem in messem alienam’* the monk has committed adultery; *messem* is an agricultural metaphor for the *cunnus*). In this passage a Biblical phrase has been given an unintended sexual twist (see Deut. 23.25 ‘*si intraueris in segetem amici tui, franges spicas et manu conteres; falce autem non metes*’).⁹⁷

I would suggest that Adams is unnecessarily cautious here. Why should we imagine that the twist is “unintended”? Matthew of Vendome’s own *Ars Versificatoria* is a field ripe for queer harvesters/reapers. Adams (24–25) allows, “The obscene misuse of Biblical phraseology is

consideration of incest here, the word appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* story of Byblis: *Byblis Apollinei correpta cupidine fratris*. (Byblis was seized by desire for her brother, the grandson of Apollo.) It also means “to shorten or decrease,” so the form that correction will take is embedded in the word, itself, as well as suggested by the succeeding swords.

⁹⁶ In a section on analogy between similar sounding words, Varro brings together *falx* and *faux*, scythe and throat.

⁹⁷ Adams, p. 24.

analogous to the misuse of epic phrases and of proverbs. For another example, see *De Monacho Quodam*: “*ubinam est inimicus homo qui uenit, et superseminauit zizania, et cubile meum multa maculauit perfidia?*” (cf. Matth. 13.25 “*uenit inimicus eius et superseminauit zizania in medio tritici*’).” Matthew’s monk asks, “For where is that inimical man who came and sowed cockle seed all over, and befouled my bed with profuse perfidies?” *Superseminavit*, besides its literal meaning of “to sow in addition,” suggests to spread seed in abundance (to sow over *and* to oversow). What’s more is the incongruity of the site this semination: *cubile meum*. While *cubile* “bed” may connote flowerbed or seedbed, it is most certainly the bed (where, we acknowledge, certain seeds are perennially planted). We are excused if we think of a stealthy intruder creeping into the dormitory and jerking off over an attractive novice. That the seedbed may be his ass is prompted by the particle *cu*. All words that contain *cu*, *cul*, or *con* should be examined for ulterior (or posterior) meaning.⁹⁸ The phoneme *bile* may suggest the ablative of *bilis*. Besides the fluid excreted by the liver, this may refer to another bodily secretion. According to Festus’ etymological dictionary, *billis* is “*apud Afros appellatur semen humanum*.” So, the *cubile* is where the *bilis* meets the *cul*. Of course the liver is the seat of many emotions, not only anger but erotic passion, which both provoke excited states. Damian’s language suggests a similar situation. Even without the strongly sexual connotations of some of the vocabulary here, the reader must be made uneasy by the imagery. We are given to imagine a resistance which is overpowered by discipline (the image of the schoolroom cannot be far behind that of the seedbed; both are seminaries), wherein the now patient sufferer is plowed like a field, and

⁹⁸ *Cubile* is also a lair or foxhole; perhaps, that sense is at work here: the anus as cubby-hole. I wonder what medieval man made of the redoubling of *cu* and *cul* in *cucullus*, that is, the hooded cloak that certain friars wore (whence our word “cowl.”) Adams (74) notes that a corruption of this word, *cucutium*, appears in Dioscorides’ *De Materia Medica*, and offers this definition: “*cucullus* (hood” for the head; the “head” in this case is the *caput, glans*.”

inseminated, and bears fruit.⁹⁹

According to Roberts A. Kaster, *patientia* is a defining quality of slaves and women, first, in their absence of free will: “there was no request, no imposition that a slave would not be expected to suffer without resistance.”¹⁰⁰ Strangely, for women it was also *impatientia*, the lack of forebearance that defined them.¹⁰¹ That is, they were considered unable to control their passions, unable to resist the urgings of love. Paradoxically, the pathic combines slave-like *patientia* and female *impatientia*. This ambiguity is perhaps understandable when the same word can mean both manly fortitude and long-suffering or sexual submission. Perhaps a better translation of Peter’s *impatientibus* would be “senseless” (Kaster sees a correlate in “irrational,” when used of women). Peter’s impassive men are made passive, even pathic, by the administration of correction.

Peter contrasts the familiar *gladius* (penis-sword) with the *vomer* (prick-plow). What does it mean, then, to beat cocks into pricks? And what of the dubious quality of *confluo*, which has a sexual register for each of its various meanings: to flow together; to melt; to forge? And why does the vision of vice as *hirsuta dumeta* (the hairy thicket with which it bristles) cause such horror? And what of *messis*, is there ambiguity there as well? According to Adams (24) “messem is an agricultural metaphor for the *cunnus*.” *Dumeta* are turned to *messes*; the phallic thorns

⁹⁹ Plautus’ *Truculentus* (149–50) has a pert maid offer a young man this advice: “*Non aruos hic, sed pascuost ager: si arationes habituris, qui arari solent, ad pueros ire meliust.*” (This is no place for plowing, but for grazing.⁷ If you must have a place to till, it’s better to go to boys, who are used to being plowed.)

¹⁰⁰ Kaster, p.138.

¹⁰¹ On the other hand, they were also defined by it. A Roman female was said to enter puberty when she could bear a man (that is, submit to one): *patiens viri*.

transform into another type of bush.¹⁰² The word signifies not only “standing harvest” but also that which is reaped already. We can perhaps see a surgical solution to the terror aroused by cock and pubes.¹⁰³ The rest of the passage is troubling, too, as it expands on the image of cultivation as enforced fucking. “*Nam dum impatiens quispiam per disciplinam mitior factus tanquam planus ager increpationis cultro proscinditur, deinde suavi semine sanctae praedicationis aspergitur, et sic demum fecunda bonorum operum fruge vestitur*” (For when an impatient man, made meeker by discipline, is broken up like a level field by the plowshare of correction, and is then planted with the gentle seed of holy preaching, he is finally filled with an abundant harvest of good works.) *Fodio* and its derivatives are common metonyms for sexual activity of every variety. Here the disciplined impatient (a-pathic) is made meek enough to plow, and to plant a seed within. Indeed, the correction itself may encode a masculine aggression. *Disciplina*, according to *DuCange*, “*apud Monachos, est flagellatio, interdum virgae ipsae*” (is flagellation, among monks, now and then with switches). So, is the castigation done with words or rods; is this another instance of Damian’s confusion of tongue with rod with cock?

¹⁰² That the Latin mind could associate thorn bushes and the like with the penis is suggested by Adams (p. 14). A graffito from Pompeii warns, “*Vrticae monumenta uides, discede, cacator: / non est hie tutum culu aperire tibi*” (Shitter, you see the monument of Urtica; depart. It is not safe to open your asshole here), where the name of the decedent—“Mr. Nettles”—poses a threat of predication. Likewise, a fragment from the Attellan farceur Pomponius suggests the same danger (or desire), as one editor reconstructs this bit of banter: “*decedo cacatum. uerpa [num facta] est ueprecula?*” (First Speaker: I withdraw to shit. Second Speaker: Oh, has the prickle become a prick?).

¹⁰³ It is derived from *meto*, to cut. Paradoxically, Deuteronomy 23:25 admonishes “*si intraveris in segetem amici tui franges spicas et manu conteres falce autem non metes*” (If you enter into the cornfield of your friend, you may break off the ears and grind it with your hand, but do not reap with your sickle).

In Damian's metaphor, the correction is likened to being plowed: *cultro proscinditur* (to be furrowed with a coulter). Adams (150) offers evidence that *scindo* inferred *pedico*,¹⁰⁴ so the action here is doubly ambiguous. Besides its agricultural and obscene senses *proscindo* refers to verbal censure, likely fostering Damian's association of the tongue as instrument of rebuke with the threatening phallus. If this is the case, the entire *Liber Gomorrhianus* is a tongue-lashing dick-slap of his audience; Damian the censor is also Damian the sinner. Thus primed, the offender is made "mitior,"¹⁰⁵ softer, gentler, ready for the next stage of his acculturation: "semine *sanctae praedicationis aspergitur*" (to be spattered with the seed of holy preaching). To scatter seed is commonly *spargo*; *aspergo* more often to sprinkling of fluid.¹⁰⁶ Damian may favour this verb to emphasize the liquidity of this *semen*. The word also has religious connotations (both pagan and Christian). *Aspersio* (variously, *aspergo*) was the ceremony of purification by sprinkling water on a sacrifice.¹⁰⁷ It was performed with either a branch or special wand; either implement permits of metaphoric interpretation. In the middle ages the *aspergillum* served to sprinkle holy water on churchgoers; it consisted of a handle surmounted with a perforated bulb or sphere. So the sprinkled semen may be analogized to holy water, an image encouraged by the conjunction of the words in the passage, *semine sanctae*. In the bible-minded, *aspergo* might suggest the treatment of leprosy in Leviticus 14, which entails a cleansing with blood. Curiously,

¹⁰⁴ A nostalgic Priapus (76) remembers when "usque et usque et usque / furum scindere podices solebam" (I used to cleave thieves' assholes, always, all the way, without end).

¹⁰⁵ *Mitis* also means ripe. Damian presents another paradox: the object of his attention is simultaneously at both the seeding and harvesting stages.

¹⁰⁶ Actually, both words have this sense of besmattering, moistening, bedewing.

¹⁰⁷ DuCange notes that *aspersio* is "amylum dilutum," that is, watery starch. His source says this should be "clara et liquida, de optima farina" (clear and liquid, of the best flour). *Asperio*, therefore, looks like cum.

the word also means “to spot, to defile, to infect,”¹⁰⁸ an agreeable conflux of meanings for sex-as-disease thesis advanced throughout the *Liber* (as before with the equation of *virus* and *semen*). This “levelled field,” then, is also said to be stained with semen, where the *ager*, a frequent sexual metaphor, is the boy’s buttocks.¹⁰⁹ Like *proscindo* above, *aspergo* has its speech-act corollary: it means to disparage, hence English “aspersion.” Damian is doubling down on his analogy between language and sex. The result of this insemination? A metaphoric impregnation: “*et sic demum fecunda bonorum operum fruge vestitur* (thus he finally reaps an abundant harvest of good works).

To stress all this, Damian paraphrases himself: “*quia qui reprehendi prius tanquam gladio percuti*¹¹⁰ *deputabat, nunc et vomerem sacrae doctrinae libenter sustinet, ut fruges ferat et falcem supernae messionis exspectat, ut horrei coelestis promptuarium repleat*” (For he who first considers himself to be reprimanded, as if pierced by a sword, will then willingly suffer the plowshare of sacred doctrine that he may bear fruit, and await the pruning knife of the heavenly harvest that he might fill the larder of God’s granary).¹¹¹ There is a neat trick here. In a passage

¹⁰⁸ In Leviticus 14:44 the walls of an infected house are stained with spots: “*parietes aspersos maculis.*”

¹⁰⁹ *GELL*: “*Ager—pro loci foeminis, et etiam podice, sensu vero obscenissimo.*” In Martial VII.lxxi we find an example of this usage. After cataloguing the excesses and resulting anal irritations of a household, including *arator* and *rigidus fossor*, he marvels, “*Res mira est, ficos non habet unus ager*” (It is a wonder that not one of their fields produces figs).

¹¹⁰ One version of this substitutes *perfodi* for *percuti*. Both mean “to pierce.” The former, because related to *fodio*, fits the agricultural metaphor here, but not the tool. A *gladius* doesn’t dig. The presence of the gladius is confusing. First, it plays no part in cultivation, so it is incongruous here. Second, if it has been turned into the coulter, it should no longer exist. By a sort of metaphoric miracle, it is transmuted and immutable.

¹¹¹ A similar image of gradual sexual accommodation occurs in *Ars Amatoria* (1.471–74):

Tempore difficiles veniunt ad aratra iuvenci,
Tempore lenta pati frena docentur equi:

(on “swords into plowshares”) which is meant to show how one thing becomes another—a good definition of metaphor—we see how two things become something else. The *gladius* becomes the *vomer*, and both are transformed by metaphor into pricks. There seems a progression here, as if the cleric becomes inured to the *gladius*, accommodates the *vomer* (like Quartilla), and is to be inseminated with sacred seed. This potentially troubling image has a respectable history.

Damian shows his pleasure in wordplay with *deputo*, which means to reckon or regard, at least in a transferred sense. Its primary sense is “to prune,” which must occur to the reader amid so much talk of swords and sickles. Its root, *-puto*, means to cleanse, a meaning that has been put in play by *aspergitur*, and also relevant to the *Liber*’s insistence on purity and purgation. *Sustino* is not altogether straightforward, either. It means to endure or undergo, and like other words of sufferance (*patior*, *subeo*, *subigo*) it strikes me as indicating sexual submission, but willingly now (*libenter*). *Sustineo*’s sense of “to hold back” is also present in the earlier *reprehendo*; thus Damian returns to the topic of retention and repression, even at the height of expectation (as here). This may be the sort of discipline he practiced. With *falcem supernae messionis exspectat*, we are to understand that after “bearing fruit” this reprobate will dread or desire (*exspecto*) the sickle of the supernal cropping. Or, is he to await the *falx*/phallus of the celestial Messiah? If we

Ferreus adsiduo consumitur anulus usu,
Interit adsidua vomer aduncus humo.

In time stubborn oxen come to the plough,
In time horses learn to yield to the persistent bit.
Incessant use wears out the iron ring,
Curved harrow is rubbed away by inexhaustible earth.

Ovid’s advice employs a familiar sexual vocabulary: *aratrum*, *vomer*, *an[ul]us*, and *frenum*. (Besides bit or bridle, the last also refers to the tissue connecting the prepuce and glans.) The verbs used suggest suffering: *intero*, *consumo*, *patior*. While his counsel concerns heterosexual courtship, the male animals and the *anus* hint at something else.

read *missionis* as *messianis*, that is indeed what we glean. If we can sustain two misreading simultaneously we might introduce *missionis* to the mix (*missionis missionis messianis*), producing the longed-for messianic emission. And what can be said of the desired end of this harvest: “*ut horrei coelestis promptuarium replete*” (so he may fill to overflowing the cellars of the celestial silo)?¹¹² This promptuary may be more than a storehouse, another type of receptacle. Consider the word in its sense of “cellar,” and we construe a basement receiving area. Damian tautologises with its near synonym *horreum*, which also means granary or cellar, but also recess, closet, coal shed, backroom. All these associations may find a correspondence in the asshole.

The Surgery of My Words

Qualiter enim proximum meum sicut me ipsum diligo, si vulnus quo eum non ambigo crudeliter mori, negligenter fero in ejus corde grassari? videns ergo vulnera mentium, curare negligam sectione verborum?

¹¹² The Bible passage which Damian must have in mind is Galatians 6:8. It reads, “*quae enim seminaverit homo haec et metet quoniam qui seminat in carne sua de carne et metet corruptionem qui autem seminat in spiritu de spiritu metet vitam aeternam*” (For whatever a man sows, that will he reap. The man who inseminates according to his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, he who sows in the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit). Corruption and death are linked to the sex act; it both brings destruction on the actor, and also causes another to be born into mortality. Galatians 6 as a whole is relevant to Damian’s entire project. It begins, “*Fratres et si praecupatus fuerit homo in aliquo delicto vos qui spiritales estis huiusmodi instruite in spiritu lenitatis considerans te ipsum ne et tu tempteris*” (Brothers, you who be spiritual, if a man be taken in some offense, instruct him in a spirit of lenity, considering yourself, that you be not tempted too). The reader of Damian should ponder why his text should be so harsh, if to avoid the like temptation he has been advised to deal mildly. Either he invites temptation, or his text is not as rigid as it seems.

As it happens, Galatians 6 may have occasioned Damian’s use of *circumcisus* above. Verses 12–15 discusses those who exult in the flesh and circumcision as a sign of favor. At 6:12 we are told the Galatian leaders “*volunt vos circumcidiri ut in carne vestra gloriantur*” (They desire you to be circumcised that they may glory in your flesh). And at 6:15, “*In Christo enim Iesu neque circumcisio aliquid valet neque praeputium sed nova creatura*” (For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision nor foreskin avails, but only the new-created man).

In what way can I be said to love my neighbor as myself, if I negligently suffer that wound, by which I have no doubt he will cruelly die, to rage in his heart ? Seeing these wounds to reason, will I neglect to cure him by the surgery of my words?

Sodomy is seen as wound, which must be remedied with the surgeon's scalpel. His language, itself, is compared to laceration. As we see later in Chaucer's Pardon and Alanus' Genius, the remedy for sodomy is a sort of excision, a cutting off of the sinner (in excommunication) or of the offending member's member. We are familiar with the idea of a "sharp" tongue, but what are we to understand when told that Damian will apply this to the wound? On this anus-as-*vulnus*, or some venereal sore on the penis?

Damian says that in the days of Augustine and Ambrose homosexuality was uncommon and that its recent eruption explains their reticence on the subject. "*[E]t si eorum tempore cum tanta impudentiae libertate haec pestis fuisset oborta, non dubie credimus, quod prolixa hodie viderentur contra eam volumina codicum exarata*" (And if in their time this plague had sprung up with such impudent license, I believe beyond doubt that today we would see extensive volumes of codices set down against it). The word Damian uses for "set down, written" here is *exarata*, which continues his agricultural topos, for it means "plowed up." Presumably the tropological use derived from incising letters on tablets of wax; again we see the analogy of *stylus* and *vomer*. Damian continues, "*[S]ed hoc dico, quia quod ipsi vitia corrigendo, et confundendo fecerunt, hoc etiam juniores, ut facerent docuerunt*" (And I say, that these vices which these same men made to be corrected and confounded, they have taught younger men how to do.) There is ambiguity in this sentence. Have Augustine and Ambrose taught recent readers to chastise in a similar vein? Or have they taught their juniors *how* to sin by speaking about it—a perennial problem when teaching about a sin which may be theretofore unknown?

Videlicet ut qui se Dei militem recognoscit, ad confundendum hoc vitium se ferventer accingat, hoc totis viribus expugnare non desinat: et ubiunque fuerit repertum, acutissimis verborum spiculis confodere, et trucidare contendat; quatenus dum captivator densa cuneorum acie circumfunditur, captivus ab his, quibus servierat, vinculis absolvatur; et dum adversus tyrannum consona vox omnium unanimiter clamat, is qui trahebatur, praeda fieri furentis monstri protinus erubescat: quique ad mortem se rapi plurimorum testimonio perhibente non dubitat, in semetipsum reversus, ad vitam redire quantocius non pigrescat.

This is to say, he who knows himself to be God's soldier, should fervently gird himself to confound this vice, and not desist fighting it with all his might. And wheresoever it be found, he should strain/stretch himself to thoroughly pierce and slay it (or, him) with the sharpest barbs of his words. While the he who captivates is surrounded by the thick points of these troops, the chains to which the captive has been enslaved will dissolve. And then unanimously and in unison all will cry against the tyrant. And the boy who has been dragged away will immediately blush to have been made the prey of this monster of desire. And with the testimony offered by so many that he was being dragged to death, but, returned to himself, he will as quickly as possible come back to life.

Words already familiar from our discussion: *erubesco, spiculis, acies*. Suggestive words: *rapi; captivus; servierat; vinculus absolvatur; traho; praeda; reverses; circumfunditur; confodere; cuneus; trucidare (trunco caedere)*.

In antiquity the *miles accinctus* was the soldier prepared for war—with his gladius belted on. To confound the vice of sodomy, then, Damian advises his knights to gird themselves, to get their swords at the ready. *Confundo*—understood as to perplex or confound—is also to jumble together, or to join, unite, and fuse. Like the related words *diffundo, suffundo*, and *refundo*, it conveys the idea of pouring out. Is Damian, then, illustrating how the vice may be expelled from the body? *The pugnus in viribus expugnare* suggests the use of the fist, while *vir* hints at the virile member. Adams (p. 147) says *pugno* signifies sexual combat. Besides “prepare,” *accingo* is also to protect or enclose, as with a wall, or perhaps a girdle (*cinctus*). Demian's series of fighting words *confundo, confodio, contendio*, and *circumfundio* all align battle with sex. *Confodio* is to pierce or transfix, here with *acutissimis verborum spiculis*, the sharpest of verbal

spikes. Its root in *-fodio* reinforces the idea of fucking. The agricultural-sexual register appears in *spiculis*, too; a *spicula* is a little *spica*, ear of grain or the top of other plants. *Contendo* is to stretch or strain eagerly.¹¹³ It is used as auxiliary to *trucidare*, to mince, or massacre, a word that fits Adam's category of "cutting" words that denote intercourse (see pp. 149-51). Tropologically, *circumfundō* is to overwhelm or surround; its principle sense is to surround with a liquid. (Damian may have a defensive moat in his mind's eye, which would gibe with the sense of *accingo*: to enclose with a wall or *enceinte*.) And what serves in this office of a wall? *Densa cuneorum acie*, the crowded troops of a battle-wedge. Or, the thick, sharp edge of a wood-splitting wedge. Both *acies* and *cuneus* are cutting tools. The first is any sharp object, in general, and the share of the plow, in particular, the operative instrument in any metaphorical plowing. The wedge has the same sexual correlate.¹¹⁴ Curiously, the phallic *cuneus* is also associated with the *cunnus*. The phonetic similarity encourages this, as well as the shared triangle shape of both.¹¹⁵ (*Cuneus* was also an *angulus*.) Another cuneiform approximation of the vagina: the keystone of an arch, the quoin. In medieval Latin it was *crypta*, *catacumba* (crypt, catacomb).¹¹⁶ Isidore concocted an etymology that encodes a sexual meaning: *Cuneus est collecta in unum militum multitudo. Vnde propter quod in unum coit, ipsa coitio in unum cuneus nominatus est* (A *cuneus* is a number of militia gathered in one place. Because it comes together as one (*in unum*

¹¹³ *Contendo* is also to direct one's weapon at the enemy, so to shoot, hurl, let fly.

¹¹⁴ The *Addenda Lexicis Latinis* notes, "Cuneus enim hic est idem quod sudes" (*Cuneus* is the same as "stake").

¹¹⁵ There is debate about an etymological link between *cuneus* and *cunnus*, as there is between *cunnus* and "cunt."

¹¹⁶ The *cuneus* was also the stamp used to chase money, whence our "coin." Considering the medieval metaphor of minting as sex, the word is overladen with erotic associations.

coit), this united coition is called a cuneus). I imagine the word had the same associations for both authors.

The dissolute sinner's rescue from captivity is occasioned by the loosening of chains: *vinculis absolvatur*. For any cleric, the verb *absolvo* must convey the idea of *absolution*, *absolution*, remission from sin, a rare instance of clemency in Damian's diatribe. (He may have another *absolutio* in mind—the prayer for the dead—in which case his pardon will be less looked for. (This morbid death is carried in the medical sense of *absolutus*: hopeless, leading to death.) The character of his captivity should be considered. *Servio* is to be enslaved to, but also to serve, and to devote oneself to. Does Damian have an inkling of the willing surrender of agency that comprises some of the pleasure of master-slave sexplay? (A similar surrender occurs in the submission to God's will.)¹¹⁷ *Servio* is also to gratify, at times sexually, to service. Adams (163) attests its use in homosexual context. For example, he offers Cicero's second Philippic, where He Harangues Marc Antony for urging Caesar to accept the kingship: “*Quid petens? Ut servires? Tibi uni peteres, qui ita a puero vixeras, ut omnia paterere, ut facile servires*” (Asking for what? That you might serve him? You might solicit for yourself, who lived so since you were a boy, having suffered all, that you might easily service him.)¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Other meanings that Damian puts in play here are *servio*, to sing, made apposite by *consona vox*. A *servus*, is a serf, who pledged his fief with a kiss. Finally, the word resonates with the military language in the passage. The *serviens* was an *armiger*, an arms-bearer; the *serviens armorum* was also called *serviens cum gladio*.

¹¹⁸ Like Damian, Cicero equates tyranny with homosexuality. The repeated *servires* identifies the political subject with sexual subjection. In the *peteres-paterere* pun, Cicero clearly marks Antony's petition as pathic. This imagery was no doubt prompted by the circumstances of the occasion, itself. Antony made the offer having come from the Lupercalia, when one runs a race naked. There is an instance of aggressive sexual wordplay later in the chapter. He thunders, “*Num exspectas, dum te stimulis fodiamus? Haec te, si ullam partem habes sensus, lacerat, haec cruentat oratio*” (What are you waiting for? That I prick you with a goad? This, my address, should rip you open, drawing blood, if any part of you can still feel). *Fodio* would seem a word the circumspect Cicero would avoid in the context of sexual licentiousness. Likewise, *stimulus*—

Rescued by rebuke, the sodomite, *qui trahebatur, praeda fieri furentis monstri protinus erubescat* (having been raped, will grow red at having been made the prey of this raging monster of desire). The sodomite is victim of both an external agent and an internal urge. There is ambiguity and flexibility around the nature of this *monstrum*. Is it the pervert who seduces boys? Is it the male member, which allures them?¹¹⁹ Or is it unnatural desire, itself? And, insofar as *erubeo* evokes the blushing of a tumescent penis rather than an embarrassed face, the sexual assault either prompts or produces a corresponding desire. *Ruber*, *GELL* informs us, is used often and especially of Priapus and priapic business (*saepe et specialiter pro Priapus and Priapi rebus*). The verb means precisely this in *Priapeia* 84: *ruber sedere cum rubente fascino* (to remain ruddy with a reddening prick).¹²⁰ *Protinus*, which characterizes the response as “immediate” (or “without interruption”), is formed on the *tenus*, a stretched cord—like that of a bow, a frequent image for the erect penis. That *tenus* is also a snare—playing on the venery image of *praeda*—convinces me that Damian intends his reader to attend to the particle’s different meanings. And *traho* is multisemous, meaning to drag off (like *rapio*), but also to drag out (like one meaning of *protinus*). Other meanings relevant to Damian’s tropology: to allure or influence; to purge; to take in fluids. One final sense at play is *traho* as to extract or withdraw. Read the line as “who, having withdrawn, will blush,” figuring the shame returns in the post-coital aftermath. Damian pursues this idea of “coming back to oneself” in what follows: “*quique*

spur, prick—as an image for his *oratio*. One wonders what unspecified *part* of Antony’s body Cicero wants to leave bloody from his stimulating word-fuck.

¹¹⁹ On the cock as metaphorical *monstrum*, see below.

¹²⁰ The phrase is used of a statue of the god, in contrast to the both the speaker who has experienced erectile dysfunction) and the object of his lust, *candidus mihi puer* (my bone-white boy). Statues of Priapus were often painted red.

ad mortem se rapi plurimorum testimonio perhibente non dubitat, in semetipsum reversus, ad vitam redire quantocius non pigrescat" (And seeing himself dragged away to death as so many tell him, he will not hesitate or delay but, returned to himself, he will as quickly as possible come back to life). Being dragged off to death, is a familiar medieval image. The word *ratio*, no doubt, also conjures the pagan myth of Persephone dragged to the underworld. If, rather than "to death," we understand *ad mortem* as "until dead," an especially violent *raptus* presents itself. If *mors* is the *petit mort*, then this is a more rapturous loss of consciousness.¹²¹ The process of recovery, here, becomes curious. First, it is made comical by the insistence on its immediacy: *non dubitat, quantocius, non pigrescat* (he does not hesitate, as soon as possible, he does not grow sluggish). *Piger* (whence *pigresco*) means unwilling or averse;¹²² indolent or inactive. Nonius records fragments from Ennius and Accius on the word *pigret*: "*Post aetate pigret subferre laborem.*" (In old age I am slow to undertake the labor) and "*Omnes gaudent facere recte, mali pigrent.*" (All men delight in doing right; evil men are slack in doing it.) If we understand *malus* "beam or mast" it oxymoronically means "the upright poles grow slack," in contrast to the earlier *recte*. The verb may automatically prompt images of genitals and anal sex; *piga* is, according to *DuCange*, "*Nates, vel bursa, mentula*" (Buttocks, or ballsack, or cock).¹²³ *Piger* also means sad. That the sinner does not grow dejected, is a sign of his anticipation of God's grace, but

¹²¹ The French did not invent this idea. Adams has a short entry (159) on death and dying as metaphor for orgasm. One example a Vergilian line made obscene by Ausonius (*Cento Nuptialis* 120): "*Illa manu moriens telum trahit*," wherein "Dying, she removed the dart" becomes "Coming, she withdrew his cock." According to *GELL* *mortuus* relates to sexual death and emasculation.

¹²² Like *reverses* in the preceding clause, it entails the idea of "backward."

¹²³ The *Glossaire roman-latin du XVe siècle* notes that *piga* is the Greek *πυγή*, "derrière" and that another *piga* is a "*bursa rustici*" (a peasant's bag), whence its application to the scrotum and, by extension, the penis.

contradicts the well-known *tristesse* that follows sex. Second, the process is likened to a return to life. Metaphorically, this corresponds to the return of one's reason after a momentary lapse, but also the return of potency that eventually (as soon as possible!) occurs after coition. What's more, any talk of revivification in a Christian context must evoke resurrection. That being so, this sexual situation—retumescence after ejaculation—is likened to man's rebirth (in baptism, or at the end of days) or the Resurrection, itself. If this last metaphor holds, then the revived cock is Christ. The association is strengthened by the presence of *praeda* in the passage; it also means surety, and it can be applied to the Redeemer here. Yet this shocking correspondence need not be seen as entirely blasphemous. By a roundabout reasoning, the alternately willful and unwilling member, the Augustinian emblem of our fall from grace, becomes, here a sign of our salvation. It also allows the reader to look at the problem of impotence from a providential distance. Man's disobedience does not necessitate Christ's incarnation, but rather Christ's mission necessitates the Fall. Likewise, the pleasure of the flesh demands its frequent failure.

Damian expands on the “*vitium contra naturam*” in an extended medical metaphor:

Sed si medicus horret virus plagarum, quis curabit adhibere cauterium?¹²⁴ Si is,
qui curaturus est, nauseat, quis ad incolumitatis statum pectora aegrota reducat?
Vitium igitur contra naturam velut cancer ita serpit, ut sacrorum hominum
ordinem attingat[.]

And if the doctor shudders at the poison of his plague, who will take care to brandish the cautery? If he who must administer the cure gets ill, who will restore

¹²⁴ The manner of cure is curious. The *medicus*, here is a surgeon; the *cauterium*, a branding iron. Of course, the metaphorical cautery is Damian's tongue; he will not flinch from using his hot rod against these patients. The tongue as weaponry, and particularly phallic ones, at that, is commonplace in the *Liber*. The means whereby Damian intends to stem this vice is figured as (sexual) assault. On the surface, the metaphor is confused. Did medieval medicine cauterize cancer? Perhaps, Peter's *cauterium* is the branding iron used on slaves and criminals. His imagined method of curbing the contagion is not to cure the afflicted but to stigmatize them, to warn others of their presence. One is reminded of William F. Buckley's call to tattoo all those diagnosed with AIDS.

the sick hearts to health? And this vice against nature spreads like a cancer,¹²⁵ until it taints the order of holy men.

The vice is *a cancer*, and *a virus plagarum* which Damian, as *medicus*, must not shrink from cauterizing. His goal is “administering a cure,” “healing” “sick” hearts, and leading them to “health,” while not succumbing to disease himself. This language is tantalizing because if it is not entirely metaphorical; it suggests an awareness of a “medical model” of homosexuality (as seen in Pseudo-Aristotle and certain medieval Arabic writers on medicine). Rather than the moral model of sodomy as sin, Damian’s language, here, is attentive to the body, not the soul. This may be prompted by the unspoken *patiens*, both patient and pathic. The condition is a contagion, which can be communicated or contracted. *Attingo*¹²⁶ (from *tango*) suggests the manner of infection: touch, bodily contact. The verb may also pun on *attinguo* (to moisten, to sprinkle with a liquid): the vehicle of this disease is fluid. As the rest of the text will make clear,

¹²⁵ Damian employs an incongruous image here: *velut cancer ita serpit*, the disease “slithers like a crab.” Sodomy is associated with creepy crawlies (*serpens*, a snake; *serpo*, louse). The physical, bodily reaction to these is suggested by *horret* (he shudders) and *nausea* (sea-sickness). The same trope is deployed in *De caelibatu sacerdotum*, where Damian writes, “*Serpit enim hic morbus ut cancer, et virosa propago ad infinita porrigitur, nisi evangelica falce quod male pullulat amputetur*” (This disease spreads like a cancer, and its viral progeny will extend infinitely, unless the gospel’s scythe cuts off what breeds so evilly). In this case, the amputation isn’t hinted at but prescribed. The language of extension (*porrigo*, *pullulo*, *serpo*) points to the male arousal that must be stemmed. Damian doubles down on disease in this sentence. The explicit *morbus* and *cancer* are joined by *virosa* and the evocative *porrigo* and *serpo*. *Porrigo* is a type of skin disease—scurvy, mange; *serpix* is ringworm and impetigo; *serpedo*, erysipelas. *Serpo* is related to ἔπιω (Greek “to crawl”), the source of “herpes.” *Propago* and *pullulo* are curious words in this context: they mean to bring forth young, to procreate, propagate. Damian touches on the perennial subject of *how* homosexuality (or homosexuals) are produced and reproduced over time (*ad infinitum*, as Damian has it). Finally, *virosa propago* can be understood as slimy slip, poisonous posterity, and man-loving race.

¹²⁶ Catullus uses *attingo* in a sexual sense in 67, concerning the virginity of a young woman: *non illam vir prior attigerat, languidior tenera cui pendens sicula beta nunquam se medium sustulit ad tunicam*. (Her prior husband did not touch her, his little dagger hung limper than wool, it never rose to the middle of his tunic.)

for Damian, bodily flux (semen, blood, shit) has strong associations with sodomy. These can be simultaneous sources of horror and delight. (*Horreo*, above, has the secondary—and more common—meaning of “to shiver in fear.” Its primary meaning is “to stand erect.）

In the next chapter Damian argues against “necessity” as excuse for the persistence of the sinner in an ecclesiastic role. He asks, “*Nunquid et necessitas non incubuerat, cum pontificalis sedes pastore vacabat?*” (And didn’t necessity weigh upon us when the Pontifical see was without a shepherd?) This language, as we’ve come to expect, is equivocal. The papal *sedes*, seat, is the throne of Peter, certainly, but it is also the buttocks. It is also land suitable for construction, cultivation, or pasturing,¹²⁷ with similar sexual significance.¹²⁸ *Vaco* is to lack, or to be without work. It also has an agricultural meaning: to leave uncultivated. So this piece of land, or ass, is left unplowed, or unseeded, by this priest (with his *baculus pastoralis*).¹²⁹ The association of untilled land with sodomy may be inherent in medieval Latin; according to *Du Cange*, the word *sodum* is “*ager incultus*” (unfurrowed field).

Necessity is said to *incubare*, to weigh upon or worry, but it also connotes more literal brooding: to sit on eggs. It almost necessarily conjures images of the *incubus*, with all the concomittant sexual anxiety associated with that figure (made more so, by the male aspect of this sort of demon).

Damian calls St. Paul to testify. “*Praedicator egregius accedat ad medium, et quid de hoc vitio sentiat expressius innotescat*” (Let the excellent preacher come forward, and what he thinks

¹²⁷ *Du Cange* gives examples of *sedes molendini*, *feni*, *prati*, and *bladorum* (mill-land, hay-field; meadow, grange).

¹²⁸ In these it is almost synonymous with *solum* (bottom, foundation of a building, land).

¹²⁹ Perhaps there is an unspoken relation between *pastor* and *pastinator*, that is, shepherd and dibbler (one who digs trenches for young vines).

of this vice be expressly made known.)¹³⁰ Even this simple summons is a provocation.

Praedicator is not unlike *praedator*; the notion of *praeda* (plunder, booty, prey) is hardly suppressed.¹³¹ (A *dicator* is a religious functionary who dedicates or consecrates something.)¹³² The frequent pun on *pedicator* operates here, too. This egregious actor “*acced[i]t ad medium*,” approaches the public, certainly, but *accedo* and *medium* are both semantic swingers here. *Medium* is the middle of a man, his genitalia. Adams (146-47) offers a number of instances of this usage. For example, Martial 2.62.2 describes a debauchee: “*lambebat medios inproba lingua viros*” (Your filthy tongue would lick at mens’ mentules). *Accedo*, too, has a sexual register. In the Vulgate Damian would have read, “*patitur menstrua, non accedes*” (Do not enter into a woman suffering menstruation), where the meaning “have sex with” is the tacit meaning of *accedo*. In Damian’s text, then, “*Praedicator egregius accedat ad medium*” can mean “Let the egregious *pedicator* attack the cock.” Nor are *expressius* and *sentio* entirely innocent. *Sentio* refers to all other faculties besides reason, so a sensual awareness of the vice is adduced. *Sentio* is also to experience, suffer, or endure, so the testimony requested may concern what the witness has himself undergone. Insofar as the word also means to be susceptible or liable to, Damian

¹³⁰ The apostolic testimony is taken from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (5:5): “*Hoc autem scitote intelligentes, quod omnis fornicator, aut immundus, aut avarus, non habet haereditatem in regno Christi et Dei.*” (Yet know this, you who have understanding, that every fornicator, impure man, or miser, has no patrimony in the kingdom of Christ and God.) Damian excludes a phrase from his citation. After the enumeration of the disinherited, Paul writes, “*quod est idolorum servitus*,” as if to characterize all these as slaves to idols. The fornicator, we assume, worships the flesh; the greedy man, wealth. The idol of the unclean man will depend on one’s understanding of *impurus*. Damian takes it to mean “sodomite.”

¹³¹ *Du Cange*: “*Praeda Diabolica, dicitur mulier rapta*” (A ravished woman is said to be the Devil’s prey).

¹³² According to *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Cato the Censor mentions a head of the Latin League who acted as *dicator* of a grove to Diana. His name was Egerius Baebius (*The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. VII, Part 2, edd. F. W. Walbank, A. E. Astin, and M. W. Frederiksen, Cambridge University Press (1990) p.272.)

presents, again, sodomy as duress and disease. *Expressius* as adverb denotes how this information should be delivered (clearly, strongly, explicitly); as comparative adjective, the manner in which it is obtained (by pressing or squeezing out, as juice, oil, or water). Adams (182) points out that words of pressing are often used of the “male role.” He offers examples for *primo*, *comprimo*, and *opprimo*. *Imprimo* must carry this sense, as well, since impressing and coining were perennial tropes for sex. *Expressius* may be a double *double-entente*. It expresses the idea of force applied by the “active” male in sex and the notion of squeezing cum from someone’s cock.

Of this supposed injunction against sodomy, Damian declares, “*Sed illis profecto haec lex specialiter est indicta, a quibus exstitit violata, teste Paulo* (But certainly this law was imposed especially for those by whom it stood violated, according to the testament of Paul), again presenting us with *ex post facto* law, intended to punish those who violate as-yet-unpromulgated censure. That the law is *violata*, allows the reader to make the mental leap: to violate boys is to violate God’s law is to violate God.

Besides this assault on justice, Damian tortures logic, too: Who, he asks, will keep this law, if those it addresses break it? Why, everyone else, all those it does not concern. It is as if he asked, “Who will not murder, if murderers commit homicide?” Damian concedes that wisdom is no safeguard to sin:

Si enim peritus quisque inordinate ad ordinem ducitur, videtur quodammodo sequentibus, et, ut ita dicam, simplicioribus erroris semitam sternere, quam ipse aggressus est, tumido superbiae pede calcare: et non solum judicandus est, quia peccavit; sed etiam quia propriae praesumptionis exemplo ad aemulationem peccandi et alios invitavit.

If any learned man is inordinately led to the [church’s] order, he seems to his followers and, as I say, to the more simple, to lay before them the wayward path which he himself has entered, trampling with the swollen foot of pride. And he is

not judged only because he sinned, but also because by the example of his own presumption he invited others to sin in emulation.

The *peritus* (from *perior*) is not only the learned man, but the experienced one, or even the skillful one. The reader is led to question whether this expert possesses book learning or carnal knowledge, and which of these impresses itself on his followers.¹³³ These are denominated *sequentes*. Like our “follow,” *sequor* is to come after (in time, space, or as an effect) and also to obey or imitate. It has two other meanings which complicate our understanding. One, “to fall to, come into possession by inheritance,” contradicts the earlier statement that the sodomite will have no inheritance. This is a version of the idea that the homosexual does not procreate but recreates, that his progeny is formed by inculcation;¹³⁴ Damian emphasizes this with *exemplo* and *aemulationem*.¹³⁵ Curiously, this is the same mode by which priests increase their numbers, an asexual multiplication. Perversion is akin to conversion. More prurient, perhaps, is *sequor*, “to

¹³³ *Peritus* may also be the participial form of *pereo*, which means to perish; to be lost; to pine with love; and to spend wastefully. All these, of course, can be employed in a sexual sense, so *pereo* is a particularly potent word. *Lewis and Short* says it also means “to pass through, leak, be absorbed,” as *lympha*, water, as in the quasi-sexual verse from Lucretius (*De Rerum Naturae* 1.250–51): “*pereunt imbres, ubi eos pater aether/ In gremium matris terrai praecipitavit*” (At last, the pelting rain poured down, there in the womb of mother earth where Father AEther hurls it headlong).

¹³⁴ *Inculco* means to force down or in. It has been said—by whom I do not know—that the filthiest word in Latin is *inculcavit*, not for its meaning (He forced it in) but for its sound. It consists of a series of vulgar French phonemes: *in + con + cul + ca + vit* (in the cunt, asshole, shit, cock).

¹³⁵ Or (more mildly) modelling, if we read *sequor* in the way that Pliny (*Epistulae* 7.9.11) does, applauding the sensuous plasticity of wax: “*ut laus est cerae, mollis cedensque sequatur si doctos digitos jussaque fiat opus*” (The glory of wax is that soft and submissive it yields, and when pressed by deft fingers it may become a work [of art]). The letter encourages the occasional composition of light verse, to counter more serious prose: “*Ut enim terrae variis mutatisque seminibus, ita ingenia nostra nunc hac nunc illa meditatione recoluntur*” (As the earth is by various and alternating seeds, so are our talents cultivated anew by now this, now that exercise).

follow the hand in plucking or pulling; to come off or away, come out; to come easily.”¹³⁶ For example, Varro (*De Re Rustica* XLVII) writes of caretaking *in seminario*, “*Eae, dum tenerae sunt, vellenda. Post enim aridae factae rixantur ac celerius rumpuntur, quam secuntur*” (These [weeds], are to be plucked while they are immature. For after they become dry they offer resistance and more quickly rupture than yield). These pliant *sequentes* are also the flock’s young, according to *Du Cange*: “*Pulli equini, vitulini et alii qui matrem sequuntur*” (Equine foals, lambs, and others who trail a dam). And where do these simpletons¹³⁷ follow their damned shepherd? On—or into—an “*erroris semitam*” (a path of error), where this *semita* can be understood as a sexual byway, like the rectum. As in Plautus (*Curculio* 1.36):

dum ne per fundum saeptum facias semitam,
dum ted abstineas nupta, vidua, virgine,
iuventute et pueris liberis, ama quid lubet.

As long as you don’t make inroads through fenced-in bottomland,
So long as you hold off from wives, widows, virgins,
young men, and freeborn children, love who you like.

The adjective *semitarius*, by the way, describes someone fond of pathic pathways.¹³⁸ The elder is said to pave this path (*sternere*), which he has entered into (*aggressus*). *Sterno*,

¹³⁶ Not an arcane usage. *Lewis and Short* offers numerous examples of the word employed in this way. Ovid (*Metamorphoses* XII.371–72) tells of the injured centaur Demoleon’s attempt to remove a spear: “*trahit ille manu sine cuspide lignum (id quoque vix sequitur), cuspis pulmone retenta est*,” (With his hand, he drew out the shaft, without the head, and that hardly come out easily; the barb stuck in his lung).

¹³⁷ *Simplicioribus* in the text, from *simplex*: simple, guileless, artless, meant to contrast with the past-master pastor.

¹³⁸ These byway boys also appear in Catullus 37.14–16, as unlikely suitors to his enamorata:

hanc boni beatique
omnes amatis, et quidem, quod indignum est,
omnes pusilli et semitarii moechi

means “to cover” and, when used of roadways, “to pave.”¹³⁹ *Aggredior* is “to step toward.” Even figuratively, this image carries sexual potential; verbally, it is more so. *Sterno* is “to stretch out, to extend.” It is also “to lie down” and “to prepare a bed.” Other dubious senses include “to saddle,” “to throw to the ground,” and “to make prostrate.” The violence of the last two is complemented by the aggression inherent in *aggredior*, for the “*aggressus est*” can be read to indicate “he has attacked” the passageway.¹⁴⁰ The mode of this approach is no less ambiguous: *tumido superbiae pede calcare* (To trample with the swollen foot of pride). *Tumido* is a telling word. While a swollen foot is ill-suited to any sort of sortie, a swollen prick is at the ready. *Pes*, foot, may be a displaced reference to the penis.¹⁴¹ This is certainly the case in the Old Testament. The Vulgate’s *Isaiah* 7.20 describes God’s emasculating treatment of a reprobate Israel: “*In die illa radet Dominus in novacula conducta [. . .] caput et pilos pedum et barbam universam*” (In that day the Lord will shave with a mercenary razor. . . the head and the hair of the feet and the beard altogether).¹⁴² Nor is *calcare* innocent; *Du Cange* defines it,

All you noble and fortunate boys
make love to her, and—which is intolerable—
All you pussies and back-alley catamites.

¹³⁹ The perfect participle of *sterno* is *stratum*; a paved road was a *strata*, whence the English “street.”

¹⁴⁰ A little less like assault are “he has solicited, or bribed, or tampered with” it. The idea of solicitation is echoed with the concluding word, “*invitavit*,” to attract; to urge; to allure to transgression.

¹⁴¹ Another designation of *pes*, is the stalk or stem of a plant, a frequent metaphor for the male member. One type of fumitory was called “*pedes gallinacei*,” chicken-feet.

¹⁴² Damian was certainly familiar with this verse. It is in the same chapter that Isaiah prophesises “*ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium*” (Behold, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son).

“*Conjugium alterius violare. Lectulum herilem ascendere*” (To violate the union of another. To mount the master’s bed). A complication is introduced if we admit another *Du Cange* definition: “*Vestigium alicujus insequi*” (To follow in another’s footprints). Thus, the road he lays open before his followers, he has trodden in emulation of a precursor. (If the path he displays is his own asshole, it is a wonder that Damian *ipse aggressus est*.) Damian doubles down on his wordplay in this sentence, for *calceo* means to pave, as with chalk(or some other white stuff?). Finally, it means to fuck.¹⁴³

Spiritual Incest

Damian begins Chapter VI with the lament, “*Sed, o scelus inauditum! o facinus toto lacrymarum fonte lugendum!*” Observe the ambiguity of *scelus inauditum*—is the crime “unheard of” or “unheard”? If the latter, does this contradict the Biblical claim (*Gen. 18:20*) that this crime cries to heaven? (*Clamor Sodomorum et Gomorrae multiplicatus est; clamorem qui venit ad me.*)

More poetically charged is the second clause: “O crime to be mourned with an entire fountain of tears!” The crime, *facinus*, is also the prick, itself, *fascinum*. Such a reading is reinforced by the nearby *fonte*, for *fons*, too, is a metonym for *mentula*. *Lacrima* can also be understood in a sexual way (this is often true of bodily fluids). According to Porphyry, Lucillius used it in his way: “*at laeva lacrimas muttoni absterget amica.*” (But my girlfriend wipes the tears from my prick with

¹⁴³ According to the *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*, “*Calcare dicitur gallus galinam iniens*” (*Calcare* is said of a cock entering a hen). The *calcar* is a cockspur (or a rider’s spur, therefore goad or excitement). “To apply the spur” is a euphemism in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* (2.731–32): “*cum mora non tuta est, totis incumbere remis utile et admisso subdere calcar equo*” (When delay is not safe, it is useful to press on all your oars, and spur on the horse in heat).

her left hand.)¹⁴⁴ Damian's image morphs into one of a prick flooded by cum. If *fonte* is read as *funde* there is metaphor metamorphosis; the organ is simultaneously prick and buttocks.

“*Quis*,” Damian asks, “*jam in gregibus reperiri valeat fructus, cum pastor in ventrem diaboli tam profunda sit praecipitatione demersus?* (Who can find fruit to flourish in the flock, when the pastor is plunged headlong so deeply in the belly of Baal). Why the mention of *fruit* in a flock?¹⁴⁵ More than an amusing mixed metaphor from a consummate rhetorician, the incongruity asks to be resolved. *Fructus* is enjoyment, the thing enjoyed (also profit). In *Priapeia* 50, *fruenda* is used in the sense of to be enjoyed sexually.) Perhaps this could be read as “Who can find in the flock [one] worthy to be fucked?” As before, *pastor* echoes *pastus* (food, whence pasture) which prompts the slippage of Damian's idea into the stomach of the devil—and also the lower intestine, and anus. (As in Horace, *venter* has a sexual connotation. The “belly” is a ready substitute for the womb and related part, here conjuring, perhaps, a biform hermaphrodite demon.) I am convinced that the word *pastor* has some particular meaning for Damian which aligns it in his mind with the penis, itself. Perhaps, it is the relation of the pastor with his *baculum*. We are are comfortable with metonymy, whereby “staff” can mean both the priest or his office, or the *membrum virile*. We must re-accustom ourselves to think synecdochally, whereby the whole stands for the part (here the pastor is the rod, which is the penis). The multiple words which mean simultaneously “staff” and “penis” include: *baculum*; *virga*; *vitis* (which we have seen Damian favor for its other meaning—grape vine—and its relation to *vitium*); *radius*; *ramus*; *scipio*; and *trudisa* (in verb forms *trudo* means to “thrust;” we've already

¹⁴⁴ Lucilius *Satires* (Loeb) p. 102.

¹⁴⁵ Perhaps there is an unspoken relation between *pastor* and *pastinator*, that is, shepherd and dibbler (one who digs trenches for young vines).

seen this in Damian). And, of course, the shepherd's crook, itself: *pedum*.¹⁴⁶ This item is a ready stand-in for the male member, as images from antiquity attest.

We unthinkingly understand Damian's “*cum pastor in ventrem diaboli tam profunda sit praecipitatione demersus*,” to be “as the pastor is plunged so deeply into the pit of hell.” Let's not neglect the insistence on the body of the demon here, or the body of the priest, for that matter. We can conceive instead: “When (or while) the pastor is plunged headlong (or headfirst) so deeply into the innards of the devil.” What head is taking this dive? (The “*ceps*” of *praeceps* and other derivatives infers a head.)

Damian now considers the notion of spiritual generation, which (as he expands it) comes close to envisioning sexual communion with God, to create offspring:

Qui de poenitente facit pellicem, et quem spiritualiter Deo generat filium, ferreo diabolicae tyrannidis imperio per suae carnis immunditiam subjungat servum? Si mulierem quis violat, quam de sacro fonte levavit, nunquid non absque ullo cunctationis obstaculo communione privandus esse decernitur, et sacrorum censura canonum per publicam poenitentiam transire jubetur? Scriptum namque est; Quia major est generatio spiritualis, quam carnalis.

Whoever makes a (male) whore out of a penitent, whom he has given birth to spiritually as a son of God brings the servant under the iron rule of diabolical tyranny through the impurity of his flesh. If anyone violates a woman, whom he has raised from the sacred font, is it decided that he be deprived of communion, is ordered to be without any obstacle of delay, and is ordered to cross through the censure of holy canons by public penance. For it is written: Spiritual generation is greater than carnal.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Today we associate the crook with the office of bishop. But it is not this instrument which most easily associates that rank with the male member, but his headdress. The conical shape of the mitre lends itself to morphological association with the glans penis. “A bishop in a turtleneck” is an amusing euphemism for an uncut cock. It is unlikely that Damian had this in mind; the apparel was only coming to signify the office around 1150, the same time Damian was writing the Liber. Its first recorded use is in a Papal Bull of our Leo IX. It is, however, said to be a development from the Phrygian cap, like that worn by Paris (and Ganymede) and other pastoral figures.

¹⁴⁷ In *De caelibatu sacerdotum* (PL 145 0384C), concerning spiritual children, Damians says, “*Et certe perspicuum est quia spiritualis generatio major est quam carnalis. Porro cum tu sis vir et sponsus Ecclesiae tuae, quod utique perhibent et annulus despunctionis, et virga commissionis*”

Damian skirts close to blasphemy here, as he equates himself with the Virgin Mary as mother of a “Son of God,” who is furthermore made a sexual slave—one meaning of *servus* here—to his rigid sceptre, *ferreo imperio*.¹⁴⁸ (*Subjungo* is not only to subject——as in Payer—but to join beneath or below, a sense hinted at by the *cunct-* in *cunctatio*, hesitation or doubt.) Recall that this “spiritual generation” is a consequence of being doused by the *fons sacer*, the sacred fount. Peter adds that although reprehensible as incest, at least those who sin with spiritual daughters sin according to nature (*naturaliter*), while those who corrupt their male charges dissolves the bonds of nature:

Ille autem sacrilegium commisit in filium, incestus crimen incurrit in masculum, naturae jura dissolvit. Miserabilis quippe conditio est, ubi sic unius ruina pendet ex altero; ut dum unus extinguitur, alter in mortem necessario subsequatur.

However, he who commits sacrilege with his [spiritual] son, incurs the crime of incest with a male, and undoes the laws of nature. Certainly this condition is miserable, when the ruin of one hangs on that of another, and while one is extinguished, the other follows into necessary death.

Dissolvo, to destroy, also means to release from obligation, to disengage. The word carries a connotation of dissolution, effeminacy. The act of sodomy dissolves the rigid *regula*, it unbinds us from the duty (or debt) to Nature. (An ancillary association with sodomy may be engaged by another sense of *dissolve*: to loosen the bowels.) The *ius naturae* is not only a figuration of

(And surely it is transparent that spiritual generation is greater than carnal parenthood. Furthermore, you are your church’s man and spouse, which is especially symbolized by the ring of your betrothal and the staff of your commision). Spiritual generation—which is, after all, asexual procreation—is figured by the priest’s *annulus* and *virga*, his anal ring and his cock. The concluding *commissionis* may hint at illicit sexual unions. Jewish-Christian liaisons are called “*dampnate commisionis*” (damnable cominglings) in a 13th-century catalogue of papal statutes (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottob. lat. 762).

¹⁴⁸ “With a rigid prick” could be render *pene tento*. Is this idea suggested by *poenitente*?

natural law, disdained by sexual outlaws, it also “*Quod filii habent in bonis parentum suorum*” (That claim which sons have on the goods of their parents).¹⁴⁹

Once again, Damian connects the homosexuality with property and inheritance.

Condicio, which is the more usual spelling of the word, means a situation or mode of being.

Damian bemoans the “miserable state” these men are in. But, insofar as it is an agreement or proposition, he laments a deplorable union. (*Lewis and Short* gives ample examples of its use as “marriage” and “illicit affair,” and by extension, a paramour. *Condicio* is derived from *condo*, to join together, to form. A *conditio*, then, is a founding or fashioning. *Conditio* is derived from *condio*, to make pleasant, to season, or to soften. Damian’s *condicio*, then, is simultaneously fundament and condiment. *GELL* notes that it can be understood *pro verendis* (for the private parts), as it is in the chapter of the *Historia Augusta* on Elagabulus: “*Romae denique nihil egit aliud nisi ut emissarios haberet, qui ei bene vasatos perquirerent eosque ad aulam perducerent, ut eorum conditionibus frui posset*” (And he did nothing else at Rome but send out emissaries to procure those who had particularly large members and bring them to him in the palace, where he might enjoy their endowments.)¹⁵⁰ Damian may be hinting at the same enjoyment as the annalist. The use of the verb *pendo* may reinforce this genital image. With *ruina* Damian supplies a contrast to *condicio*: destruction and formation, erection and ruin. A *ruina* (from *ruo*) is a throwing or falling down (perhaps in sexual play?). It is also a rushing out of something, like water. Wetness is an aspect of *extinguo*, too, for that word means to quench, or put out what is

¹⁴⁹ *Du Cange*.

¹⁵⁰ Of interest, perhaps, is the use of the phrase *bene vasatos* here. It may be compared to *bene mentulatus*. *Vas*, in this case, is not vessel, but tool. *Lewis and Short* notes that it refers to military equipment and agricultural implements. This is another case where a word can mean both prick and anus.

burning.¹⁵¹ *Tinguo* is to wet or bathe with any liquid. *Du Cange* notes a medieval usage that complicates Damian's scene of spiritual incest: *baptizare*. The spiritual father, who has baptised his son, undoes that sacrament by soaking him with an altogether different substance. Not chrism but jism.

Sicut enim melli, vel quibuslibet esculentioribus cibis venenum fraudulenter immititur, ut dum ad comedendum alimentorum suavitas provocat, virus, quod latet, facilius in hominis interiora se transfundat.

Just as poison is cunningly mixed with honey, or some other more delicate foods, so that the sweetness of the food will induce one to eat it, so the virus, concealed, transfers itself more easily into a man's being.

Discussing the accused sodomites' appeal to ambiguous canons to excuse their sin or mitigate their punishment, Damian suggests "*virus, quod latet, facilius in hominis interiora se transfundat.*" (The poison, concealed, more easily enters a man's system.) Here, of course, Damian uses *virus* metaphorically. However, it should be remembered that this established meaning, itself, represents the erasure of the word's original sense: slime. (Perhaps, conflating the effect of disease with its cause—rotting vegetable matter with plant blight.) More important, still, for my reading, is the other meaning of *virus*: semen.¹⁵² So, we might render this instead: The concealed cum pours itself—as from one vessel to another—into a man's gut.

¹⁵¹ Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* 4, 1097–98) describes a dry dream, the impossibility of sexual satisfaction: "ut bibere in somnis sitiens quom quaerit et umor /non datur, ardorem qui membris stinguere posit" (As in dreams the thirsty man seeks to drink, and the fluid is denied that could douse the ardour in his members).

¹⁵² Isidore of Seville (XI.1.103) writes, "Idem et veretrum, quia viri est tantum, sive quod ex eo virus emittitur. Nam virus proprie dicitur humor fluens a natura viri." ([The private part] is also called *veretrum* because it belongs only to the male; or because slime [virus] is emitted from it [virus emittitur]. For slime [virus] properly means the discharge flowing from the nature of a man.)

Virus, in Latin, can mean sperm or seminal fluid, as in Pliny on fish (9.74.157): “*Nec satis est generationi per se coitus, nisi editis ovis interversando mares vitale adsperserint virus*” (Copulation is not enough, in itself, to cause generation, unless when the eggs are laid the males swim back and forth sprinkling them with life-giving sperm). And Vergil notes of a lust-inducing liquid: “*Hic demum, hippomanes uero quod nomine dicunt pastores, lendum destillat ab inguine uirus, hippomanes, quod saepe malae legere nouercae miscueruntque herbas et non innoxia uerba.*” (This, which shepherds rightly call *hippomanes*, is a slime that slowly drips from a horse’s groin, which wicked step-mothers often gather and mix with herbs and not-innocuous words.) This is in part an etymology, for Vergil connects “-manes” with *manare*, to drip or distill, hence his formulation “*lendum destillat*.” Of course, he also recognizes that this root is the Greek *mania*. In Latin such a love potion is known as *venenum* (from Venus), which in turn, came to stand for any toxic liquid. The reader of Damian does well to remain mindful of the meanings and associations in the miasma of Damian’s diatribe: *Venus* and *venenum*, *virus* and *vires* and *vinus*, and *vitis* and *vitium*.

Damian often exploits the ambiguity (when declined) between *vitis* and *vitium*, vine-stalk and vice. *Vitis* is also the designation of the centurion’s baton, the instrument of corporal punishment in the Roman army.¹⁵³ Pliny, when describing the benefits of viniculture, writes, “*Quid quod inserta castris summam rerum imperiumque continet centurionum in manu vitis, et opimo praemio tardos ordines ad lentas perducit aquilas, atque etiam in delictis poenam ipsam honorat*” (The vine has been introduced into the camp, and in the hand of the

¹⁵³ The *vitis*, *virga*, and *fustis* are all instruments of castigation. Laws codified whom might be punished with each. The first two are common metaphors for prick. The last (*fustis*, “a knobbed stick) is related to *futuo*, to fuck. (According to note in Adams, p. 118.) As if to encode the idea of castration as punishment, *castigo*, besides its English cognate, also means “to prune.”

centurions is the mainstay of supreme authority and command and with its rich reward it lures on the laggard ranks to the tardy eagles, and even in offences it confers honour on punishment itself.” (Loeb translation) If Damian knew Pliny’s *History* (Blum’s edition of his letters marks frequent similarities of thought and diction), he must have endorsed this notion of *punishment as reward*, as well as the easy slippage between *delictis* and *delectis* or *dilectis* (that is, offenses, picked fruit, and loved ones), or between *poenam* and *penem* (penalty and prick).

Adest apostolus Paulus, we are told, the Apostle Paul comes to you (or comes on you). *Adeo*, like many verbs of motion, can have a sexual sense (cf. Catull 8.16).¹⁵⁴ Fittingly, the adjectives used to describe the saint seem like a sexual progression: he is throbbing, shaking, calling out (*pulsantem, concutientem, in clamantem*). He is also, as before, knocking at the hearer’s door.¹⁵⁵ *Adest apostolus Paulus; audi illum vociferantem, pulsantem, concutientem, clarisque super te vocibus in clamantem: “Exsurge, inquit, qui dormis, et exsurge a mortuis, et exsuscitabit te*

¹⁵⁴ Adams (p. 175) on *adeo*: “The euphemism illustrated at Plaut. *True*. 150 ‘ad pueros ire meliust’ (*pedicationis causa*) was current at all periods, with variations of verb.”

¹⁵⁵ In the Acts of the Apostles (12:13), Peter does just this. “[*Petrus*] *pulsante autem eo ostium ianuae processit puella ad audiendum nomine Rhode*” (Then, Peter having knocked at the front door, there came forward to hear him a young girl named Rose). The lover’s appeal for access (commonly, frustrated) at the beloved’s door is a commonplace of Roman poetry. Catullus’ use of an anthropomorphized portal is a precursor to the *Roman de la Rose*’s Bel Accueil. Of course, we should not neglect the Song of Songs, here, either: “*Si murus est aedificemus super eum propugnacula argentea si ostium est conpingamus illud tabulis cedrinis*” (If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar.), where the reference to virginity is patent.

Besides the passage from Acts, the Christian reader will recognize the Gospel variations on the idea of “Seek and you shall find”: *omnis enim qui petit accipit et qui querit invenit et pulsanti aperietur* (To all who ask it, will be given; what you look for, you will find; and, knocking, it will be opened to you). (Luke 11:10; also Luke 11:9, Matthew 7:7, 7:8) Also relevant to the apocalyptic bent of Damian is the promise from Revelations 3:20: *Ecce sto ad ostium et pulso si quis audierit vocem meam et aperuerit ianuam introibo ad illum et cenabo cum illo et ipse mecum* (Lo! I am at the door, and I knock. If anyone hear my voice and open the door to me, I will enter into him, and I will eat with him; and he, with me.)

Christus. (The apostle Paul comes; hear him calling to you, knocking at your door, shaking you awake, in a clear voice he exclaims: “Get up, get up, sluggard, awake from death, and Christ will stir you up.) In this sentence we encounter a sequence of words which simultaneously evoke the tumescence of early morning and its remedy. The repeated *exsurgo* (to get up) resembles *exurgeo*, which means “to squeeze out liquid.”¹⁵⁶ *Exsuscito*, to rouse, resembles the post-classical *exsucidus*, drained of juice or sap.¹⁵⁷ *Exsuco* resembles *exsugo*, “to suck out,” which is, in turn, close to *exsurgo*, where we started. So: “Squeeze one out, he says, Droopy. Get up from the dead; Christ will suck you off.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ The erotic use of *exurgeo* occurs in Plautus’ *Rudens* (108–09): *Itidem quasi peniculus nouos exurgesi solet, ni hunc amittis, exurgebo quicquid umoris tibi est.* (If you don’t give it up, I will squeeze out the last drop in you, just like a new sponge is squeezed.) Note the use of *peniculus*. According to the entry in *Festus* (Paul. *ex Fest.* p. 208), “*peniculi spongiae longae propter similitudinem caudarum appellatae*” (Slender sponges were called “*peniculi*” because they resembled tails.) This is not only a sponge but a little penis to be drained.

¹⁵⁷ According to *GELL*, *exsuccus* means *effututus* (totally fucked out) in this epigram: “*Impubes nupsi valido; nunc firmior annis exsucco et teneri sum sociata viro.*” (When immature, I married a stud; now in later years I am reined to a limp and sapless hack.)

¹⁵⁸ Suetonius uses the word *exsugo* when describing the death of Cleopatra: *Etiam Psyllos admovit, qui venenum ac virus exsugeren*t (He even brought in the Psylli, to suck out the venom and poison). *Exsugo* is used in Celsus and Pliny to describe the same practice of sucking out poison. The Psylli were apparently impervious to snake-bites. (Whence this immunity is anyones guess. Their sucking expertise may be a consequence of a tribal anomaly: they were all male.) Writers on agriculture (Cato, Varro) use the word to describe withering plants, often in conjunction with the notion of *mollitias*. Columella writes (*On Agriculture*, Book IV): *Namque id maxime vitem infestat, ubi non omnis pars bracchii pari vice laborat, neque aequa portione sucum proli suaे dispensat sed ab uno latere exsugitur; quo fit ut ea vena, cuius omnis umor absumitur, veluticta fulgure arescat.* (For it is especially injurious to the vine when every part of the arm does not exert itself equally, and when it does not dispense its juice to its offspring in equal portions, but is drained on one side only; whereby it comes about that that vein whose moisture is entirely taken away withers as though struck by lightning.) Vetruius, in a passage outlining the dangers of a body’s exposure to heat (*de Architectura* 1.3.4) writes, *Nam semper calor cum excoquit aeribus firmitatem et vaporibus fervidis eripit exsugendo naturales virtutes, dissolvit eas et fervore mollescentes efficit inbecillas.* (For always, when heat cooks the strength out of the atmosphere and with warm vapours removes the natural manly forces by suction, it dissolves and renders them weak, being softened by violent heat.)

Damian's contemplation of the heavenly Jerusalem is revealing:

Hoc itaque modo praesul spiritus subjectam carnem disciplinae freno coercent,
et ad supernam Jerusalem quotidie ferventis desiderii gradibus festinare
contendat. Si enim attendatur felicitas, ad quam non sine transitu attingitur, leve
fit quod transeundo laboratur, et conductus fossor taedium laboris alleviat, dum
mercedem operis, quae debetur, inhianter exspectat.

In this way the spirit restrains the subject flesh with the reins of discipline, and daily strives to quicken his pace with fervent desire for the heavenly Jerusalem. If you stretch towards that happiness which is not come to but by a real going over, light will be the labors of that passing/piercing, just as the hired ditchdigger relieves the tedium of his exertions by breathlessly anticipating the wage that is coming to him.

The language of attainment (*attendo*, *attingo*, and *exspecto*) is sexually suggestive. Besides the general idea of reaching a goal, which may have a sexual sense (not only “coming to” but “coming), the words have deeper significance. *Attendo* is “to strive for, to stretch towards,” with all the erotic tension that implies. *Attingo* (*ad-tingo*) is “to touch or taste,” or “to lie next to.” *Transitus* (froms *trans* + *eo*, to go) is a passage (either a “passing away” or a “passageway). The death may be the *petit mort* of ejaculation, when the “spirit” leaves the body. It may also imply that the route to happiness is through an unnamed “passage” (Pliny employs *transitus* for the windpipe. It may have that meaning here, or another narrow bodily canal). If we hear *attingo*’s phonic twin, *attinguo*, here, the passage is doubly suggestive. *Attinguo* is “to moisten,” so *non sine transitu attingitur* might be understood as “unless a throat (or asshole) is soaked.” *Transeundus*, which is another nominalization of *transeo*, has many semantic shades: passing through, piercing, spending, and exceeding. (As with any word formed on *eo*, a sexual color may be applicable.) The exertion necessary for this endeavor is stressed by the reduplication in *laboratur*, *laboris*,¹⁵⁹ and *operis* as well as by the comparison with a notably exhausting job:

¹⁵⁹ *Labor* can be applied both to lovemaking and its occasional sequel, childbirth. Damian shows a typical mindset by associating sex with both birth *and* death. To some men, the first is more

fossor, ditchdigger.¹⁶⁰ The sexual sense of this word and its root *fodio*, have been seen earlier.¹⁶¹

Here I'd like to draw attention to two ways in which Damian qualifies this action. The *fossor* is *conductus*, and he is owed a *mercedem*. *Conduco* is “to hire or contract” someone. *Merces* is payment, fee. Granted, in this passage it continues the idea of “recompense” and “reward” in the preceding lines, but the emphasis on remuneration for this fucker prompts the thought of the meretricious rent-boy, the gay-for-pay, who does not delight in his work, itself, but calculates his hourly rate. (*Taedium*, is boredom, sure, but it is also disgust and loathsomeness). *Alleviat* suggests alleviation or relief, perhaps release. (It means to make light, so: to unload a burden.) At the end Damian again strikes the note of expectation, anticipation, and attendant desire. *Inhio* is to stand open or with open mouth, to gasp or gape. Our *fossor* “waits gasping” either in the exertion of ejaculation, or—in a paradoxical reversal of active with passive—“agape,” with ass

fearsome. What's more, the verb *labor* (past participle, *lapsus*) means to glide, slide, slip, or sink. (In this, it is synonymous with *transeo*; both can mean to pass away.) As it happens, in Greek the day-laborer is a *penes*, πένης.

¹⁶⁰ The *fossor* as pederast appears in Ausonius' criticism of a certain Marcus:

Feles nuper pullaria dictus,
corrupti totum qui puerile secus,
Perversae Veneris postico vulnere fossor,
Lucili vatis subpilo pullipremo.

Recently noted as seducer and kidnapper,
Who debauched the entire boy-sex
The ditch-digger of a backward Venus wounds the backside
As the poet Lucilius says, a chickenshit chickenhawk.

Posticus is an apt metaphor for the anus: it is the backdoor, also an outhouse or privy. Perhaps in evidence of Marcus' perversion, the organ of evacuation is figured as the place where shit is deposited.

¹⁶¹ Juvenal uses *fossa* in an obscene sense in his second Satire: *Castigas turpia, cum sis inter Socraticos notissima fossa cinaedos?* (Do you castigate wantonness when you are the most notorious hole among the Socratic fairies?)

or mouth open to receive the allotment he expects. *Exspecto* has some of the same meanings as its English descendant, expect. But it retains its root meaning of “to look out for” (*ex + specto*), so we have an image of amazement: eyes wide and jaws dropping. There may be a bit of wordplay in the conjunction of these two words. *Hio* means to spit or spew, as well as to open, while *expectoro* (without *s*) means to drive from the breast (like phlegm). The expulsion of the body’s fluid is below the surface of this boring hole-boring. The breathlessness with which he works mirrors the gasps of climax, and the “payment” or “reward” may also be the relief he is “owed” (*quae debetur*). This last phrase reminds us that sexual union was often referred to as the marital debt. The reward, then, is coming to him, and coming, *tout court*.

A scene of salvific return casts a sexual shadow when Damian writes,

[Et] qui non meruisti ad littoris sinum sine jactura pertingere, libeat arenis exposito, post periculum alaci voce illud beati Jonae celeusma cantare: “Omnes gurgites tui, et fluctus tui super me transierunt; et ego dixi: Abiectus sum a conspectu oculorum tuorum, verumtamen rursus videbo templum sanctum tuum.”

Spread out on the sand, you may with pleasure give the coxswain’s call, in a joyful voice like blessed Jonah: “All your torrents and your floods have washed over me; and I said, ‘I am cast down from the sight of your eyes, but I will see your holy temple when I am turned around.’”

Pertingo is another intensive verb (like *perfero*), meaning to extend or stretch out and to attain. Adams has a brief section on *tango* and its derivatives, like *adtingo* and *contingo*, saying they “furnish a large class of euphemisms.” (185) Adams says the word implies intercourse in (*inter alia*) Martial, Horace, Terence, and Plautus. In Catullus it is associated with facefucking (*tangam te prior irrumatione*). Ovid uses it of masturbation. So the failure to “*sinum sine jactura pertingere*” in Damian’s text may play with the notion of thoroughly thrusting home, but not without ejaculation. *Jactura* has a nautical sense: it is what is cast overboard, jetsam. It’s more general sense is that which is lost, spent, or sacrificed. It is derived from *iacio*, to cast, scatter,

sow. The sexual parameters of the word are clear. It survives in our “ejaculate.” A similar word *jacitura*, is formed from the verb *iaceo* (with e), meaning to lie prostrate or to fail. (Adams, p.77, remarks of the idea expressed in *iaceo*, *dormio*, and *cubo* (to lie with, to sleep with, to bed), “This euphemism may be universal.”

The joyful note in this passage is struck by the words *libeat* and *alaci* and *beatus*. It is not hard to imagine what follows as a *jouissant* shout, or a post-coital interjection. *Libeo*, whence *libido*, implies pleasure, readiness, and willingness; *alacer*, cheerful, eager, or excited. *Beatus*, of course, suggests an even more sublime exultation. “*Libeat arenis exposito.*” It will be a pleasure, exposed on the sand. *Expono* means to lay out, exhibit, expose. It also, has a nautical sense relevant here: to put ashore or throw overboard. *Expositus* further suggests putting something at another’s disposal, to be ready to pay; also open to all and unprotected. One can picture, then, the unfortunate sinner laying open to all on the sand. In the sense of “to unload or unpack” and “throw to the ground,” *expono* has additional sexual potential. Adams (243) notes that many words formed with *ex-* or *e-* connote vomiting, urination, or defecation. He gives a snippet from Priscians’ medical text *Euporiston*, on the effects of enemas: “*expositus scybalus*” (The turd having been pushed out). Indulging in a bit of scatology here, Damian may imagine the shipwrecked sailor as vomited (or shit forth) from a monster, like Jonah? As is often the case, the oral and the anal are often collated; what goes into them and what comes out may likewise become confused. Sinner spews forth and is spewn forth; lays his ass open for others to enter and is shit out, himself. Allowing the expansion of the semantic field (or arena)¹⁶² to include this idea of emission is reinforced by the very mention of that sand. Sand as inarable soil for seed is commonplace. (Onan poured out his seed on the ground, *semen fundebat in terram.*) Likewise, the dryness of (boys’) buttocks was often contrasted to the wetness of the vagina. So, in a sort of confusion familiar to us now, the sinner can

¹⁶² *Arena*, insofar as it refers to the *palaestra* or the space of gladiatorial combat, has clear sexual connotations and associations.

be seen as both passive and active; he has either onanistically wasted his spunk on the ground, or opened himself to others on the playground.

Fear of a Queer *Planctu*

Sexual Ambiguity in Alain de Lille

Like Damian's diatribe, Alain de Lille's *de Planctu Naturae* is ripe for queer glosses.¹ It cries out for such treatment. I wish to disperse the clouds of anxiety surrounding scholarly treatment of this seemingly anti-sodomitical tract. By showing this *cri de coeur* for the *jeu d'esprit* that it is, I hope to bring renewed attention to an influential text.

In lacrymas risus, in fletum gaudia verto:
In planctum plausus, in lacrymosa jocos,
Cum sua naturam video secreta silere,
Cum Veneris monstro naufraga turba perit.
Cum Venus in Venerem pugnans, illos facit illas:
Cumque suos magica devirat arte viros.
Non fraus tristitiam, non fraudes fletus adulter
Non dolus, imo dolor parturit, imo parit.

I turn to tears from jests; from joys to lamentation;
To a plaint from applause; and from games to grievances.
When I see Nature sideline her secrets,
When shipwrecked throngs are lost to a monstrous Venus,
When Venus wars with Venus, making “hes” into “shes,”
Whose sorcery unmans her men.
No illusion begets this sadness; nor counterfeit weeping, deceit.
It isn’t guile, but anguish that is in labor—no, is giving birth.

¹ See Elizabeth B. Keiser. *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in “Cleanness” and Its Contexts*. Also Denise N. Baker, “The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition.” *Speculum* 51 (1976): 277–91. And *Rethinking The Romance of the Rose: Text, Image, Reception*, edited by Kevin Brownlee and Sylvia Huot. *De Planctu Naturae*’s queer potential has not been ignored by recent critics (notably, Leupin and Ziolkowski), nor, I suggest, by its earliest readers. Alain’s tropes were adopted and adapted by a pan-European pansy tribe.

“*In lacrymas risus [...] verto,*” Alain begins: I turn from to tears from jests. The poet is alchemist, transmuting pleasure into pain. *Risus, gaudia, plausus* and *jocos* become *lacrymas, fletum, planctum*, and *lacrymosa*. Laughter, joys, applause, and jokes are transformed—into tears, weeping, wailing, and more tears. I am prompted to question what substance is being distilled or dissolved here. Does lamentation’s liquid manifestation have a corollary in pleasure? Perhaps, *gaudia* suggests as much. Petronius uses the word in a sexual sense: he asks, “*Nam quis concubitus, Veneris quis gaudia nescit?*” (Who does not know the joys of Venus, the joys of fucking?). *Gaudia* suggests seminal fluid (and some feminine liquid) in *De Rerum Naturae* (5.851-54), where Lucretius itemizes three necessities for procreation:

pabula primum ut sint, genitalia deinde per artus
semina qua possint membris manare remissis;
feminaque ut maribus coniungi possit, habere
mutua qui mutent inter se gaudia uterque.

First, there must be nutriment; next male genitalia, whence
Semen can flow through the passage of the relaxed members;
And a woman must have that with which she can conjoin with men,
Where they may exchange mutual joys, each to the other.²

In Martial *gaudia* metaphorizes semen. In Epigrams 9.417-10, having adduced Mars and Horatius as models of virility, Martial berates Ponticus, a chronic masturbator:

Omnia perdiderat si masturbatus uterque
Mandasset manibus gaudia foeda suis.
Ipsum crede tibi naturam dicere rerum:
Istud quod digitis pontice perdis homo est.

If either had masturbated, he would have wasted all;
He’d have scattered his gouts of filth with his hands.
Trust me, Nature, herself, tells you this:
What slips through your fingers, Ponticus, is a human being.

² Or through which the exchanged *jouissances* may move?

Martial emphasis on hands is noteworthy. Besides *manibus* and *digitis*, the idea is occluded in *masturbo* (*manus + stuprum*) and *mando* (as it were, *manu + do*, to bestow by hand). I'd like to imagine Alain knew this epigram, with its emphasis on masturbation, a disgust at seminal discharge (unusual in Martial), and the prosopoeticizing of Natura. Martial's *gaudia* are decidedly messy and may have suggested masturbatory effluvium to a medieval reader like Alain. *DuCange* defines *gaudo*: *Gallice, Tincture*," pharmacological or alchemical distillate. Of the similar sounding *gota*, we are told it is *canalis, tubus*, and "pro *Gouttiere, Stillicidium vel emissarium*" (for gutter, runnel, drainpipe) and also the liquid which drips from them.³ (The Latin *gutta* is the etymon for both *gouttière* and *goutte*, gutter and gout.) *Gaudia*, then, may suggests both splooge and spigot—and, if we entertain other associations of *goda/gutta*, the gulleys that may receive these emissions: throat or rectum.

Curiously, Alain using *mando* in a related sense in his *Liber Parabolarum* (210, 0593A):

Si quis arare sibi fructuosum curat agellum,
Et mandare suum postea semen ei,
Primitus extirpet spinas quae frugibus obsunt,
Et vepres si quae sint ibi, falce secet.

If you want to plow a fruitbearing field,
And afterward sow your seed by hand,
First, pull out the prickles which hinder success,
And cut with a scythe any brambles there.⁴

³ *Gaudeolum*, a "little joy" is "Gemma, monile, aliave res hujusmodi pretiosa, Gall. Joyau" (Gemstone, string of pearls, or other precious thing of any kind. In French, *bijou*). Or in English: *gaud*.

⁴ In another place Martial (2.62) pillories depilatories:

Quod pectus, quod crura tibi, quod bracchia vellis,
quod cincta est breuibis mentula tansa pilis,
hoc praestas, Labiene, tuae—quis nescit?—amicae.
Cui praestas, culum quod, Labiene, pilas?

You pluck your chest, your legs, your arms,
And your buzzed cock is ringed with short hairs.

Advice for those pursuing spiritual perfection, the metaphorical image might apply to the sexual initiate whose ease of movement is impeded by bushes of another sort. In the same section Alain gives similar counsel:

Obsunt et filices, filices delere nocivas
Studet qui segetes purificare volet.
Non seges quodcunque solum cum semine profert,
Emergunt sordes luxuriante fimo. (0592A)

And when thickets hinder,
He who wishes to purify the soil
Must strive to raze the noisome weeds.
Fields do not thrive only by seeding
Filths spring forth from the lusty dung.

Here the sexual seethes beneath the surface. The *segetes* are not merely a crop, but the field in which it is grown. Figuratively, then it is both the buttocks and the hair sprouting there. *Seges* may also conjure other words from the semantic field of agriculture. According to *DuCange*, it stands for “*Granum, quod molendum defertur*” (Grain which is brought to the mill for grinding). *Segum* is a type of bread. So the reader might entertain an compounded image of the *panis*-penis, the ass-*mola* (millstone) that is ground and pounded, and the white seed-stuff collected there. The *-merg* sub- merged in *emergunt* may allude with *mergus* (vine-layer), *mergae* (pitchfork), and *merges* (sheaf). Greek *ἀψέργω* is to pluck, exactly the action to take against emergent hairs. (*Seges* may play on the idea of eradication: *sego* is a medieval form of *seco*, to cut. *DuCange* defines a particular use of this verb: “*Segare, pro Jugulare, gladio collum secare,*” that is, jugulate, to cut the throat with a sword.) This same ass-*ager* occulted in *seges* is signalled by *solum*. Used here adverbially to mean alone or only, the noun *solum* is the lowest part of

Everyone knows you offer these, Labienus, to your—girlfriend.
But to whom, Labienus, do you proffer the asshole you pluck?

something as well as the ground or earth (which I happily translated as “bottomland” elsewhere.)

The *sol* in *solum* might suggest that the insemination is not to be undertaken by daylight, associating the fertile with the furtive. The *filices* Alain finds such an obstacle are not only obtrusive bracken, but also the pubes which injure the intrusive prick. *Nocivus* is noxious, but inflicting harm, as well, so an apt word for these hairs which hinder easy access, but are also caked with dung. As it happens, the word gave rise to *filicos*, men who are “*Mali et nullius usus*” (Festus), evil and good-for-nothing. Combined with the idea behind Greek φιλικός (amiable), we have fine characterization of certain fuzzy filthy felons. “*Non dolus, imo dolor parturit, imo parit*” (It isn’t artifice, but anguish that is in labor—no, it is giving birth). Alain concludes with an image of asexual reproduction, spontaneous generation: While semen is fruitless in this field/fundament, the abundant shit there gives rise to sordid offshoots.

A particularly striking conversion is *in lacrymosa jocos* (of joys into annoys). *Jocus* is Latin slang for homosexual play. Its adjectival form *jocosus* was used to designate the “homosexual [man].” In this, it is an *exact* equivalent of the English word “gay.”⁵ (Gay is, in fact, derived

⁵ The words have this meaning in Catullus. Note, too, that the apparently opposite word *labor* shares the same significance! Foreplay is work. The homosexual connotation of play continued through the Middle Ages. Thomas Stehling’s anthology of homosexual verse from the post classical period contains this item:

Ludit in ancipiti constans fallacia sexu:
femina cum patitur, peragit cum turpita, mas est.

There is a constant deception at play in his two-headed sex:
He’s a woman when passive, but when active in shameful deeds, he’s a man.

See *Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship*, New York: Garland Press (1984). Ennodius’ epigram is peculiar for suggesting that the pathic partner’s behavior when active (and therefore “masculine”) is no less blameworthy. Alain will emphasize passivity when he makes his grammatical argument against homosexuality.

Still, in his *Distinctiones*, de Lille’s definition for *agere* (to act) has “*Dicitur passionem sustinere, unde: Ago quod nolo. Concupisco etenim notat, quod concupiscere non actionem, sed passionem notat...*” That is, to act “means to undergo passion [to be passive!], whence ‘that

from *gaudium*, discussed earlier.)⁶ *Jocus* is also related to the French verb *jouer*—and the intended outcome of sexual play, *jouissance* (that hobbyhorse in the nursery of critical theory). The term *ludus* also carries this meaning, in addition to heterosexual foreplay. Which of these meanings are we to construe from the following description of sodomy? *Alii autem/Diones regiam ingredi dignantes, sub ejusdem vestibule/ludum lacrymabilem comitantur.* (Others disdain to enter Dione’s court, beneath whose vestibule they join in a lamentable game.) Note, again, the conjunction of tears with “play,” as if emission of one bodily fluid ends in another.⁷ I

[evil] which I would not do, I do’ [paraphrasing Romans 7:19]. It also denotes concupiscence, which concupiscence denotes not action but passion [or passivity].” This semantic round-robin is typical of Alain, where words do double duty, as themselves and their opposites; they are themselves both active and passive, and cannot help their definitional devolution (*volo nolo*).

⁶ *Gaudeo* is to rejoice, to show joy, and to enjoy (including sexually). Its French cognate is seen in these lines from a medieval poem, which may suggest pleasure in sexual play:

Dehors les murs de leur cité
Où il se vont esbanoier
Aucune fois, et Gaudioier.

Outside their city’s wall,
Where they would go to exercize
Sometimes, and enjoy [themselves. each other].

Page 141 of “Gestes des Bretons en Italie” in *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l’Histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, Tome II, by Pierre-Hyacinthe Morice, Paris: L’Imprimerie de Charles Osmont (1744), pp. 133–71.

⁷ Alain provides a telling biblical citation in his definition of *seminare*. “*Qui seminant in lacrymis. Notat praedicare...*” The psalmist’s “who sows in tears” becomes a figure for preaching. The emission of semen is equated to, yoked with, tears. The two fluids are the same. Another curiosity is that by a slip of the pen (which slip becomes a predominant metaphor in the entire poem), this might easily read “*Qui seminant in lacrymis. Notat paedicare...*,” that is, to pedicate, or fuck in the ass. In the *Art of Preaching* (Chapter 57), Alain warns, “*O homo, memorare quod fuisti sperma fluidum, quomodo sis vas stercorum, quomodo eris esca vermium. Quod post mortem de lingua nasceretur vermis, ut noletur peccatum linguae, de stomacho ascarides, ut significetur peccatum gulae*” (O man, remember that you were fluid seed, how you are a vessel for shit, and how you will be meat for worms. That after death your tongue will give birth to worms; your stomach, tapeworms, which are figures for the sins of the tongue). This is a

think we must take seriously the poet's claim that *he* has been turned from such play to tears. A personified Jocus, a concupiscent counterpart to Cupid, appears in the *De Planctu*, as the illegitimate offspring of Venus and Antigamus.

Alain certainly knew the meaning that Latin poets gave *ludere*, so eyebrows should be raised when we come across the word as an entry in Alain's *Liber in Distinctionibus Dictionum Theologicalium*. Alain tells us that the word *ludere* is the same as *deludere* (to delude or deceive). This is a possible meaning of the word, but not the first that is likely to jump into the reader's mind. Certainly not in the context with which Alain illustrates it: "*Sara vidit Ismaelem ludentem cum Isaac.*" Now, the word in Genesis most likely means to play (even wrestle, from the practice of applying dust (*lutum*) when exercising). But Alain must give a plausible explanation for why what Sarah saw infuriates her enough to have Ishmael banished. Therefore, we are told that he "deceived" him? An easier explanation is to hand in the meaning of *ludere* which might be rendered as "to mock." The taunting of her son might anger a mother. Why doesn't Alain give us that meaning? Perhaps, because it might easily be accepted. Alain does not mean for us to accept his reading, so we supply our own. The sexually sensitive reader sees a more troublesome play here.⁸ Despite the definition given, such a reader is delighted to see Isaac

strange conjunction of the seminal with both ends of the intestinal tract. It seems almost natural that semen should be placed in such proximity to the anus and the mouth.

⁸ I am not the first to suggest as much. David J. Zucker runs through a number of rabbinical interpretations, noting:

The most controversial explanation is pederasty or pedophilia, namely that Ishmael was sexually molesting his younger brother. The exact same word metzahek is found in Genesis 26:8 when Isaac and Rebekah are in the Philistine town of Gerar. This is the third of the so-called wife/sister episodes described in Genesis.

At one point Abimelech, the ruler of Gerar, looks through some latticework and sees Isaac metzahek with Rebekah, more than laughing and playing. It is a sexual encounter. Isaac is fondling Rebekah, so Abimelech concludes that they are husband and wife, not siblings. Can this be what Sarah saw? She might have seen

sporting so with Ishmael. (Or gets a *frisson*, when recalling his own mother's unexpected exposure to such horseplay.)

In Alain's dictionary there are some entries which do not clarify the meanings of words, so much as multiply them, sometimes in contradictory ways.⁹ Under *Lucifer*, for example, we are told that the name refers to Christ! Only subsequently is it allowed its more devilish designation. This Christ/Satan multivalence occurs a few times. One is tempted to conclude that language can mean anything and, *ergo*, nothing.

that the older half-brother by the hated Hagar, was sexually molesting her son Isaac.⁸ If so, then her visceral reaction is understandable.

See p. 57 of "What Sarah Saw: Envisioning Genesis 21:9–10," in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 36.1 (Jan.–March) Jerusalem: Jewish Bible Association (2008) 54–62. Discussing the same passage Jennifer L. Koosed also suggests childhood sexplay.

There is no biblical mention of sexual activity between children, with the possible exception of Genesis 21:9, where Sarah sees Ishmael "playing" with Isaac. The verb *sāhaq* has a broad semantic range that includes laughing, playing, and fondling (sexually).

Her reaction, too, is similar:

As Ishmael's age changes, so does the tenor of the story: a five-year-old and a two-year-old may be innocently curious about each other's bodies, but a young man of sixteen sexually touching a two-year-old constitutes abuse. If Sarah has seen sexual play and not just simple play, then her immediate and uncompromising reaction (ordering disinheritance and expulsion) is more understandable and justifiable.

See "Sexual Activity between Children" under "Children" In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, edited by Erin E. Fleming, Jennifer L. Koosed, Pierre Brulé, Christian Laes, Chris Frilingos, Karina Martin Hogan, and Melvin G. Miller. Oxford Biblical Studies Online,
<http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t453/e4> (accessed Feb 21, 2018).

⁹ Simon Gaunt (102) emphasizes the medieval "libidinal investment in language," and calls the "desire to possess and dominate it, to produce an excess of abundant meaning" a linguistic *jouissance*.

This has relevance to *De Planctu*. When he finally recognizes Nature, Alain prays:

O Dei proles, genitrixque rerum,
Vinculum mundi, stabilisque nexus,
Gemma terrenis, speculum caducis,
Lucifer orbis.

O child of God, mother of all things,
Bond and immutable chain of creation,
Earthly jewel, mirror for the mortal,
Light-bringer of the world!

This identification with the dark angel surely comes as a shock to the reader. It is not enough to say that the reader would understand the word here to mean “morning star.” The nature of poetry is to allow the word to mean both/and, not either/or. Alain surely understands this, when even in his attempts to fix the meanings of words he allows them such fluidity. Further complication arises when we recall that the morning star is actually the planet Venus. So Nature here is being identified with Venus, from whom she is at such pains to differentiate herself. Perhaps, Alain hasn’t recognized her after all!

Alain’s first stanza also offers many figures of falsehood. Figure, itself, is false. Hence, poetry is vice. The language of deception is sexually charged (remember *ludere/deludere*?), and Alain develops the device of unnatural sexual acts as a type of counterfeiting. “*Non fraus tristitiam, non fraudes fletus adulter /Non dolus, imo dolor parturit, imo parit* (Deception does not beget sorrow, nor feigned tears deceit; not cunning but a keening pain goes into labor, or rather gives birth). The word *adulter* means counterfeit, falsified, adulterate, or given a foreign nature, that is “forged.” Its sinful homonym is suggested, too: sexual *stuprum*.

Sodomy—according to Foucault’s categorical assertion—is a “that utterly confused category.” In the Renaissance, for example, the term covered many crimes, including treason and the counterfeiting of coin. Peacham’s renaissance emblem of Ganymede, for example, is used as

a moralizing device—not only against sexual sin, but also monetary malfeasance.¹⁰ This notion may already be gaining ground in Alain’s day. Certainly, sodomy and the production of false coin are conflated in *De Planctu*, where Nature’s mint is corrupted—her foundry confounded—by Venus. This melting of meanings is further confirmed by the fluidity of *specie* and *species* (coin and kind). Nature’s forge will, of course, become one of the poem’s dominant metaphors.

It appears first as:

Hic modo est logicus, per quem conversio simplex
Artis, naturae jura perire facit.
Cudit in incude, quae semina nulla monetat
Horret et incudem malleus ipse suam.
Nullam materiam matricis signat idaea,
Sed magis in sterili littore vomer arat. (Col. 0431B)

He is too much a logician, for whom a simple conversion
Undoes the laws of natural manufacture.
He hammers on an anvil which emits no sparks.
The very hammer shudders at its anvil.
An image imprints itself on no material in the womb,
Rather the plowshare plows a sterile shore.¹¹

Here art and artifice are again opposed to Nature. And rhetoric is figured as sterile or perjurous. But Alain’s metaphor is anything but! His language spawns curious offspring. The mixed metaphor which Alain concocts here is an example. Ever malleable, he moves from *malleus* to

¹⁰ And the other “*Crimina Gravissima*” referenced in its title. It means to illustrate a precept from King James’ *Basilikon Doron*: “There are some horrible crimes that ye are bound in conscience never to forgive: such as witchcraft, willful murder, incest, and sodomy” (p. 48). However, “Ganimed, the foule Sodomitan” is asterisked; the reader is directed to a verse from Tibullus: “*O fuge te tenerae puerorum credere turbae, / Nam causam iusti semper amoris habent*” (O! Avoid trusting the crowds of delicate boys: They always present a true cause of love). A peculiar postscript to an entry warning against falsehoods of many stamps. (An economic, if not monetary, monitory may lie in the primary meaning of *credo*, to lend: Do not tender credit to crowds of tender boys. Lorryne Y. Baird-Lange discusses the emblem in “Victim Criminalized: Iconographic Traditions and Peacham’s Ganymede” (1990) pp. 231–50.

¹¹ My translation of *semina nulla monetat* elides other possible readings: “coins no seeds,” or “emits barren seeds.” Need we ask the rhetorical question, “What kind of hammer has *seeds*?”

vomer. What mental connection do the two terms have? *Vomer* is “ploughshare” in Latin. Alain may have hit upon the term because of the use of the word *semina*. Or, he may have been reminded of the second term by the biblical admonition (Isaiah II) “*Et arguet populos multos et conflabunt gladios suos in vomeres et lanceas suas in falces*,” that is, “He will judge many people, and they will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their lances into sickles.” Such a leap might have been easier because both terms designate the *membrum virile*. (Likewise *gladius*, sword.)¹² In the line, “*Sed magis in sterili littore vomer arat*,” Alain makes literal (and litoral) the penis as ploughshare, with an emphasis on the sterility of its enterprise. (Hammer without sparks, plough without seed.) There seems to be another play on words, here: *Vomo* also means “to vomit,” and it may be a natural or solely linguistic coincidence that the penis should be an object of disgust for Alain. Certainly, the conflation of meanings is exploited by Alain. Later in the poem, when he expands his attack to other vices (of which sodomy—heretofore symbolized—becomes a symbol), he has this to say about gluttons:

[Q]uorum voluptates inordinatae, cogitationes inconcinnae, novos sibi cibi somniant apparatus. Qui dum exactori quotidianum escae debitum nimis abundanter exsolvunt, exactor superabundans suo cogitur reddere debitori. [...] Isti, bursam ad nummorum vomitum, arcum pecuniarum invitant ad nauseam, ut exactori stomacho possint accuratius adulari. (Col. 0463A)

[Men] with disordered desires and discordant thoughts dream of novel preparations of food. While they discharge in deluge their daily debt of food to the collector, he, more than overflowing, is forced to pay back his debtor. Whatever they hold, these men store up in the coffer of their stomach. [...] That they may more elaborately indulge the dues-collecting stomach, they urge the purse to disgorge its cache, the coffer to vomit its riches.

¹² What did Alain make of the second transformation, in which *gladius* is juxtaposed with *falx*. Here the prick is to be turned into the instrument of castration!

Gluttony is seen as a species of abnormal desire. Another word for stomach is *ventris*, which refers to the womb, as well. So the ideas are conflated in the Latin imagination. The vomited foodstuff is compared to the coins discharged from a *bursa*. *Bursa* is equivalent to *scrotum*; both mean purse and the anatomical feature that protects the testes. *Bursa* also means *cloaca*, latrine (and perhaps the anatomical structure it indicates today?). Certainly, *arcus*—sometimes rendered *arca* in the middle ages—can have that sense; *Ducange* offers “*apud Paulum dicitur anus, podex*” (according to Paulus Festus it means asshole or buttocks). The *arca* which disburses here may also be the penis (Adams, 21, where *arca* is a bow, not a box).¹³ The conflation of coin with semen and vomit and shit presents a confused image in which the sinner discharges seminal fluid from his stomach (after irrumation) or the asshole (after pedication).¹⁴

Besides Alain’s use of metaphor, his metaplasms are plastic and playful, too. Alain language is labile, and liable to slip on the lips or trip the tongue as he transposes and trespasses through letters, sounds, and words. I don’t know if Alain actually coins words, but excess and excision are two sides of the *soldus*. (So sue—sou?—me.) Such linguist’s twists are suspect, and the earliest rhetorical manuals urge against them as manifestations of the “effeminate” or “oriental” or “barbaric.” Alain expands on this:

Se negat esse virum, naturae factus in arte

¹³ *Arca* can signify the case in which holy relics are deposited and the eucharistic casket. *Bursa* is a synonym. The unspoken middle term in the association of *reliques* and *coilles*, then, may be the *bursa*, which holds both.

¹⁴ The emphasis on the liquid, here, is striking. The gluttons dissolve (*exsolvo*) their debt, in overflowing rivers (*abundanter*), until the stomach/ballsack, itself over-overflowing (*superabundans*). Whether the stomach’s contents have been decocted into semen or digested into shit, its product is very runny. The idea of running, itself, may appear in a pun. *Accuro* (to take care) is not unlike *accorro* (to run) and the *nummus* and *pecunia* (coins and money) are, after all, currency. This language suggests that an urgent trip to the privy may be necessary, as does the underlying sense of *adulo*: tail-wagging. Another connotation of *adulo* may return us to a homosexual presentation of the buttocks: Festus, and no doubt many medieval writers, thought the word was a variation of *adludo*, to play.

Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, imo, tropus.
Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici;
In vitium melius ista figura cadit. (Col. 0431B)

He refuses to be a man, become unskilled in Nature's art.
Art does not please him, but rather artifice.
This artificiality cannot even be called metaphor;
Rather figured speech falls into vice.

The word *tropus* is derived from the Greek for “to turn,” and all metaphor risks the danger of turning or change with which Alain began his work. The poet recognizes the mutability of language and its shape-shifting tendencies are akin to the “witchcraft” by which man is unmanned. Related words include torture and *trover*, that is troubadour. This hints at the underlying nature of the poetic art, in which the poet must rack his brains for metaphors. Of course, for some such a trope is *de trop* (another meaning of *tropus*, whence the French expression and Italian *troppo*). “Barbarism,” the use of rude, peculiar, or unintelligible language, is here a metonym for sodomy, yet Alain is not immune to its pleasures. Immune? His metaplastic pleasure is a plague.

The Nature of Nature

Now, let's look at Nature, herself. Since antiquity (in classical and patristic writers) and well into the age of the Inquisition, the Latin term *natura* was used to designate the male member. Now, before anyone suggests that this reading is just too far to fetch, I'll go further. I remind them that *genius*, which comes on the scene later, also has this semantic baggage. *Genius* is not only the Latin for the spirit of a place (a pagan meaning not likely to find many medieval Christians to embrace it—it is related to the notion of *daimones*, or demons. The term had not yet acquired the modern meaning of virtuosity.) At this time, *genius* is the (male) generative impulse

and implement. As such, it appears in Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia*, whence Alain borrows it. There, Genius is portrayed as carrying two hammers, a commonly accepted figure for the testes. The *De Planctu*, therefore, presents us with *two* figures for the male member—both of extraordinary size and beauty.

After his initial diatribe, the poet witnesses the descent of a female figure. This is an allegorical or, more properly, personified Nature. A paragon of female beauty, the maiden is marred only by the tears she sheds for the “injury” done to her. Alain’s visitor’s physique and physiognomy are described in detail. Also, her wardrobe. (Does the interest in adornment suggest Alain leans toward the crypto-queer? His own writing suggests that “fashion sense” was a sign of the sodomite.) From celestial tiara to flower-strewn shoon, she is evidently the embodiment of created nature. Yet the poet fails to recognize her! In the poem’s first *metrum* Alain laments, “*Heu! quo naturae secessit gratia? morum / Forma, pudicitiae norma, pudoris amor!*” (Alas! Whither has Nature’s favor withdrawn? The model of morality, the measure of modesty, the love of chastity!) He blames *her* for apostasy. He has either lost what contact he had with her, or never had it. Of course, after many years, an old acquaintance may go unrecognized, especially if she has undergone some change. But Nature is depicted in all her radiance here. If the male member proliferates in Alain’s text, when called upon to imagine or describe the female genitalia, or even the garments which cover them, Alain cannot say. This is the sort of circumlocution is always suspect. (In Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* the vagaries of speech conceal not ignorance but interest.) Alain’s poetic representation of tongue-tied silence is curiously verbose:

Quid vero in caligis camisiaque, in superioribus vestibus conseptulis picturae industria somniabat, nulla certitudinis auctoritate probavi; sed tantum, ut quaedam fragilis probabilitatis remedia docuerunt, opinor in herbarum arborumque naturis, ibi picturae lusisse lasciviam. Illic arbores, nunc tunicis vestiri purpureis, nunc

foliis criniri virentibus, nunc florum parturire redolentem videro infantiam, nunc fetum senescere potiorem. Sed quoniam solius probabilitatis lubrico, non certitudinis fide hujus seriem picturationis agnovi, hanc sub silenti pace sepultam praetereo. (Col. 0438D)

I could not judge with any authoritative certainty, what artistic industry dreamed up for her slip and slippers, buried beneath her outer vestments. However, as suggested by certain ambiguous but plausible outlines, I think that lascivious pictures frisked about there in the character of plants and trees. I see trees, now clothed in purple underclothes, now trimmed with green foliage; now giving birth to the perfumed infancy of flowerbuds, now advanced into a superior fruit. But inasmuch as I only perceived this series of pictures by uncertain probability, and not by guaranteed truth, I pass it by, buried in peaceful silence.

Ignorance is couched as decorum. Alain reveals himself in his concealment of Nature's naughty bits.¹⁵ Still, his language hints at what he pictures there. *Lasciviam picturae*—not quite the lascivious pictures of my translation—embroidered lewdness is said to frolic or wanton (*lusisse*) in the *herbarum arborumque naturis*, in the guise of plants and trees. Now, *natura*, here, must mean something like the “property” or “inclination” of these flora, but its sexual significance is more readily apparent: the lustful genital organs are figured as luscious vegetation. The categories would seem to be separate (*arbor = penis*; *herba = cunnus*), but the ensuing language confuses them. The trees Alanus describes take on the nature of both sexes. The *tunicas purpureas* may suggest the ruddy color of the penis’ shaft or the empurpled membrane of a straining ballsack. *Tunica*, beside a unisex undergarment, is a skin or membrane, an integument which demands allegorization.¹⁶ Next Alain envisions leaves *criniri* (being curled like hairs),

¹⁵ Alain aims further than obscurity; he uses the word *sepultus* twice. The unspoken or semi-spoken wish is that this subject be buried.

¹⁶ Adams (72) notes the usage of *tunica* for the testicular membrane in Celsus. A glance at the section of *de Medicina* (7.18) that handles the testicles and their infirmities yields ample evidence for *tunica*. The testicles are insensible, he says (!) but “*dolent autem in ictibus et inflammationibus tunicae, quibus i continentur*” (the skin by which they are surrounded, feels pain both when inflamed and struck). As *cortex*, *tunica* might refer to the bark of a tree or the skin or foreskin of the penis.

where we must imagine the quiff's coiffure.¹⁷ The oliferous buds are an easy image for the pungent pudenda (or the fragrant anus), and the *fetum potiorem*, a maturer version of the same organ, seen as preferable, more useful, more capable (or capacious?). While this catalogue suggests a progression—flower precedes fruit—Alain entertains an image of birth in reverse. *Infantia* is given birth prior to the appearance of the *fetus*. If Alain gets even this backwards, it may be that his image of the mechanics of sex are similarly skewed. If the preterition around parturition were not enough to let us know what the poet pictures beneath Nature's chemise, he almost tells us: “*Sed quoniam [. . .] agnovi*” (But I recognized the whatsit), he confesses, using a medieval codeword for *cunnus*: *quoniam*. And the language (*fragilis, lubrico*) in which he couches his uncertainty might just as well describe the object of his inquiry: easily broken; slippery, dangerous. And despite the language of proof—*probavi* is “I tested,” “I inspected” or “I judged by trial”—we suspect that Alain has never been (nor wished to be) in the know about female anatomy. His *agnovi* might just as well be *ignovi*; instead of “I knew,” “I did not want to know.” The implications and uses of silence are many.

The poet is as unfamiliar with Nature as he is with the female anatomy (*Natura* names both). The part of Nature's wardrobe that covers her loins has suffered damaged: a rent replaces what should be depicted there. And that is? “The figure of a Man”! The allegorical meaning of this is clear enough, but the psychologically inclined might wonder why Alain would expect to see a male specimen depicted there:

Tunc ego miror, cur quaedam tuae tunicae portiones, quae texturae matrimonii
deberent esse confines, in ea parte suae conjunctionis patientur divortia, in qua
hominis imaginem picturae repraesentant insomnia?

¹⁷ Adams (76) notes that Persius coined two *ad hoc* metaphors for pubic hair: *plantaria* and *filix* (slips and fern). We have already seen Alain use *filices* facetiously. *Herbae* figure the same thing here.

Then I said, “I marvel that certain portions of your tunic, which ought to be held together by the weaving of marriage, should suffer divorce in that part of the seam in which the image of a man has been represented by the artistic imagination.

When describing this garment earlier, Alain had observed:

Tunica vero polymita opere picturata plumario, infra se corpus claudebat virgineum. [. . .] In hujus vestis parte primaria, homo sensualitatis deponens segnitiem, ducta ratiocinationis aurigatione, coeli penetrabat arcana. In qua parte, tunica suarum partium passa dissidium, suarum injuriarum contumelias demonstrabat. (Col. 0437D)

A damask tunic, also, pictured with embroidered featherwork, enclosed the maiden's body. [...] On the principal part of the garment Man, setting aside the sluggishness of sensuality, and drawn by reason's chariot, penetrated the secrets of the heavens. On that part, the tunic had suffered a scission of its parts, laying bare her abuses and injuries.¹⁸

This language is over-determined; the entirety suggests sex.¹⁹ Besides the “man” who “penetrates secrets,” the “maiden’s body” is juxtaposed to the “*parte primaria*” (the word “*pars*” is uttered three times). *Pars* and *corpus* are both Latin metonyms for the genitalia of either sex. The part and the partition are etymologically indivisible. Like a codpiece, the garment reveals what it intends to conceal. The maiden’s cleft is “hidden” by the cloven tunic. (The pathic or passive cause of this rent is indicated by the word “*passa*.”) Regarding “tunics” Alain elsewhere writes:

¹⁸ Lest we think her maiden modesty has been outraged, the speaker assures the reader that, by her countenance, she reveals that “the key of Dione’s daughter had not opened the lock of her chastity.” This representation of Nature as virgin is complicated later by the poet’s address to her as “Mother,” and her relationship to Genius, who is called both her son and her spouse (and her “other self” or *alter ego*). This doubleness of Nature has a familiar counterpart in the Virgin Mother. The duality (if not duplicity) of Nature is echoed in another of the poem’s principal characters, Venus, who appears as both *Venus caelestis* and *Venus scelestis*. Of her, more later. All this dualism bespeaks a certain Manichean bent on the part of Alain. Strange, from someone who composed a refutation of the Cathars.

¹⁹ In his description of the supposedly sexually regular flora on Nature’s robes, Alain mentions the sexually abnormal Adonis and Narcissus, “the companionable flower” (*Narcissi sociis flore, jocantia*).

Tunica proprie est vestis sub pallio et significat interiora Peccata[...] Tunica etiam, quae adhaeret corpori, significat curam saeculi[...] Signat etiam corpus humanum[.]

A tunic, properly, is a garment [worn] under the cloak and signifies the innermost sins [...] The tunic is also that which adheres to the body, and signifies worldly care [...] It also signifies the human body[.]

Alain illustrates this with an incomplete quotation from Luke 22:36: “*Qui habet tunicam, vendat eam et emat gladium*” (Who has a tunic, let him sell it to buy a sword). The unmolested text reads, “*Dixit ergo eis sed nunc qui habet sacculum tollat similiter et peram et qui non habet vendat tunicam suam et emat gladium.*” That is, “Then said he unto them: ‘But now he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise a scrip: and he that hath not, let him sell his tunic and buy a sword.’” It is not surprising that Alain associates tunics with sinfulness, when the Bible juxtaposes the word to *saccus* and *pera*.²⁰ The apostles are men without “purses” who are urged to acquire “swords” (*gladius*, also means penis). Here we have, then, eunuchs’ tunics.²¹

How, one wonders, has Nature become a stranger to the dreamer? Is he to be counted among the mass of men who are lost to (or, through) sodomy? Alain emphasizes again and again the *number* of men stained by this vice. If we buy the argument that prior to the nineteenth century a homosexual class (*genus, species*) of men did not exist, only a type of homosexual act, then the danger that Alain fears is greater than the modern reader imagines, because all men are

²⁰ This is hendiadys; both mean bag, or scrotum. Each word was also reflexively associated with the *baculus* to which the mendicant would attach the purse. Together, bag and stick, these are an undeniable figure for the cock and balls.

²¹ The multiplication of meanings and associations could go on. The *pallium*, which Roman’s didn’t wear unless among Greeks, was the philosopher’s cloak. Hence Natura is pictured as a philosopher, or maybe even Philosophy, itself. (Natural philosophy, one assumes.) The entire *De Planctu* is modeled on Boethius’ *prosimetrum*, so this is almost to be expected. But one must question whether Nature offers Alain any sort of consolation. Or if she is meant to. One final note: the *pallium*, is also the uniform of *hetaerae*, or prostitutes.

susceptible to this sin. (There were medieval thinkers who recorded certain notions about the natural or native origins of homosexuality—astrological, physical and physiological—as well as the habitual. Of course, even the latter could *transform* men. It was a byword that habit was “second nature.”

Nature’s presence causes the dreamer to swoon.²² Is this terror, or eros? *Stupor* or *stuprum*? Both are implied:

Quam postquam mihi quadam loci proximitate perspexi, in faciem decidens, mentem, stupore vulneratus, exui, totusque in extasis alienatione sepultus, nec vivus, nec mortuus inter utrumque neuter laborabam. (Col. 0442B)

Later, when I perceived she had come close to the place I was, falling upon my face, I put aside reason—wounded in stupefaction and and totally buried in the ecstatic alienation—neither living nor dead, neuter I labored between the two.

Alain’s characterization of himself as “*nec vivens nec mortuus inter utrumque neuter*” is interesting for two reasons. First, the dreamer’s stupor is made to be a state somewhere between

²² Nature, herself, is a figure of wonder, even horror. The dreamer recalls: “[S]ed potius ejus apparentia velut monstruosi phantasmatis anomala apparitione percussus, adulterina extasis morte fueram soporatus” (Rather, I had been struck through by her appearance as by the epiphany of an anomalous and monstrous phantom, as if I were rendered senseless by a trance’s counterfeit death). Nature, not Venus, is the monster. Alanus’ altered state is emphasised by *phantasma*, *apparitio*, and *extasis*. *Apparitio* has a religious application: it refers to the epiphany of Christ. In this monstrous, lawless inversion, Nature is a sort of Antichrist. *Extasis*, too, has sacred undertones. Alain’s *Distinctiones* declares “*Sopor dicitur extasis, quia anima recipitur ad contemplationem coelestium, unde in Gen.: Misit Dominus soporem in Adam, id est extasim, quia raptus fuit ad coelestem curiam et multa sunt ei de futuris revelata*” (Stupefaction is ecstasy, wherein the soul is carried off to celestial contemplation, as in Genesis: The Lord put Adam into a deep sleep, that is an ecstasy, by which he was ravished into the heavenly court and many future things were revealed to him). Elsewhere, discussing man’s natural state as opposed to *hypothesis* (*hypostasis*?) and *apotheosis*, he clarifies, “*Sed aliquando excedit homo istum statum, vel descendendo in vicia, vel ascendendo in coelestium contemplationem: et talis excessus dicitur extasis, sive metamorphosis, quia per huiusmodi excessum excedit statum propriae mentis, vel formam*” (But sometimes man exceeds this state, by descending into vices, or ascending into contemplation of the heavens, and this excess is termed ecstasy, or metamorphosis, for by this same excess he goes beyond his proper state—or nature—of mind). And a little further on, he contemplates vicious mental metamorphosis: And is that “senseless,” “counterfeit death” once again a figure for a very sensuous *petit mort*?

life and death. As such it is evidently orgasmic.²³ The speaker suffers the out-of-body sensation that accompanies sexual release; *exstasis alienatio* is a tautological description of the experience: standing outside of, made a stranger to, his self. (In the sense of “transfer of property to another,” *alienatio* may name the exchange of semen to a partner.) Alain also characterizes himself as “neuter.” He feminizes himself by describing his mind as *vulneratus*: given (or transformed into) a crack.²⁴ Isn’t it precisely such non-men—neuters—the *Planctu* presents itself as directed against?

In recovery Alain rises and falls, and the climax is sodden with ejaculatory language:

Cum per haec verba, michi natura naturae suae faciem develaret, suaque admonitione quasi clave praeambula, cognitionis suae mihi januam reseraret, a meae mentis confinio stuporis evaporat nubecula, et per hanc admonitionem velut

²³ Nature’s method of revivifying the dreamer is remarkable:

Quem virgo amicabiliter
erigens, pedes ebrios sustentando, manuum confortabat
solatio, meque suis innectendo complexibus, meaque ora
pudicis osculis dulcorando, mellifluo sermonis medicamine a
stuporis morbo curavit infirmum.

The virgin in a friendly way raising me up with her soothing hands, supported my drunken steps, and comforted me and, wrapping her embrace around me and sweetening my mouth with chaste kisses, with the salve of honeyed sermons cured me, infirm with sickly stupor.

Despite the insistence on chastity (*virgo, pudoris*), the manual *solatium* Nature supplies this suggests sexual relief. Neither Adams nor *DuCange* offers *solatium* in an erotic context, but Baldwin (*The Language of Sex*, note 43, p. 314) remarks that it appears twice in Ovid’s *Remedia Amoris*. That Nature’s hands arouse him or make him erect (*erigo*) hints as much, especially since he describes his former state as *infirmus*, requiring to be held upright (*sustentando*). Even her amicability (*amicabiliter*) is not straightforward: the word subsumes *amica*, female sexual partner. With the emphasis on hands here, it may be worthwhile to consider that Adams and *GELL* both mention the *amica manus*. Martial, in a Satire we’ve already seen (9.41), writes “*Pontice, quod numquam futuis, sed paelice laeva uteris et Veneri servit amica manus*” (Ponticus, you never fuck, but use your left hand as mistress and make devotions to Venus with your fist-friend). The lonesome Priapus of *Carmen* 33 laments “[*F*]alce mihi posita fiet amica manus” (My sickle set aside, my hand will be my friend).

²⁴ In saying “*mentem [...] exui*” (I put by my mind), where *exuo* has the sense of to strip, pull off, or deprive, Alain may be figuring this loss of reason as a sort of mental emasculation. (Plausible, when we recall that *mentula* was thought by some to be the diminutive of *mens*.)

quodam potionis remedio, omnes phantasiae reliquias quasi nauseans, stomachus mentis evomuit. A meae mentis igitur peregrinatione ad me reversus, ex integro, ad naturae devolutus vestigia, salutationis vice, pedes osculorum multiplici impressione signavi. Tum me explicans erigendo, cum reverenti capitatis humiliatione velut majestati divinae, ei voce viva salutis obtuli libamentum.

(Col. 0446D)

When Nature unveiled the form of her nature to me through these words, and with this admonition, like a preliminary key, unlocked the door of her acquaintance, the little nebula of numbness evaporated from the confines of my mind. By this exhortation, as if made nauseous with an emetic potion, the stomach of my mind vomited forth every remnant of fantasy. Returned anew to myself from the wandering of my mind, I fell headlong on the spot and stamped Nature's feet with a seal of manifold kisses. Then getting up and stretching myself, with the reverent bowing of my head as if to divine majesty, I bestowed an offering of salutation in a lively voice.

The speaker, like Genius and Nature, becomes a metonym for the mentula. *Erigendo* and *explicans* give a phallic character to his posture: becoming erect and extending himself. The root of *explico* suggests the unfolding of the flesh of the stiffening penis. *Devolutus* conveys the same idea, while the *capitis humiliatione* figures the bobbing of the excited dick's head. (*Humiliatio* contains the root *um/hum*, the basis of the word *humeo*, to be wet, as if that same head is damp with pre-cum.) Whatever the nature of the verbal “libation” he offers Nature, we know that it is surprisingly loud, like an ejaculatory grunt. (In a typically anachronous maneuver, Alain has the emission precede this: *stomachus mentis evomuit*, the bowels of my brain vomitted. The language around Nature's actions, too, are vaguely sexual. “[N]atura naturae suae faciem *develaret*” (Nature uncovered the shape of her genitals) and “*cognitionis suae mihi januam reseraret*” (opened the door to her acquaintance). The action in the first clause (*develo*) means to unveil, perhaps revealing the nature of her “nature” that the poet only saw in outline before. (Suetonius use a phonetically similar word, *devello*, meaning “to pluck the pubic hairs” in chapter twenty-two of his life of Domitian. If this is what Nature does, she is wants to reveal herself in the most intimate way.) The language of locks and doors is familiar by now as

metaphor for the virginal vagina. *Resero* is to unlock or lay open. The root *sero* means to fasten with a bar, but if Nature removes a bolt here it is only to insert another. (*Resero* also means to reseed; implying she has opened doors for others before.) The *cognitio* (acquaintance) Alain is eager to have is also carnal knowledge. Catullus (61.) writes of a bridegroom, “*scimus haec tibi quae licent sola cognita: sed marito ista non eadem licent*” (We know that only those things that are permitted are known to you. But to a husband these are not allowed), where *cognita* refers to the groom’s prior association with *unguentate glabris*, well-oiled, beardless youths. Alains *stupor*, here, is not unlike *somnium* (sleep or dream) in the poem as an entirety. And Alain, like many monks, knew in what way many dreams are brought to an end.

In admonishing the dreamer, Nature uses language which sounds like indictment: “*Heu! inquit, quae ignorantiae caecitas, quae alienatio mentis, quae debilitas sensuum, quae infirmatio rationis, tuo intellectui nubem apposuit, animum exsulare coegit* [. . .] *Cur a tua memoria mei facis peregrinari notitiam*” (Alas! she cried, What blindness of ignorance, what delirium of mind, what impairment of sense, what weakness of reason has clouded your intellect, forced your judgment into exile? . . . Why have you made knowledge of me wander from your memory?). In fact, it is just such a failure of reason and an excess of sensuality that Nature designates as primary causes of the sin under review.

Natural Law

In castigating man (or this particular man), Nature invokes the regularity of the created universe, whose individuals supplement the deficiencies of each species through (re)generation. The language she uses is legalistic and regulatory:

Cum omnia lege suae originis meis legibus teneantur obnoxia, mihique debeat
jus statuti vectigalis persolvere, fere omnia tributarii juris exhibitione legitima,
meis edictis regulariter obsequuntur; sed ab hujus universitatis regula, solus homo
anomala exceptione excluditur [...]

(Col. 0448C)

By the law of their origins all things are held answerable to my laws and must
render to me the duty of an established tribute, almost all obey my edicts,
regularly bringing the rightful tribute in the appointed manner. However, from
this universal law man alone excludes himself by a lawless withdrawal.

Nature continues in a similar strain, evoking duty, decree, ordinance, subjection (figures of order drawn from government) to teaching, discipline, doctrine, and instruction (language drawn from the cloister or classroom). Natural law moves from the cosmos to the classroom, universe to university. This section is the most often discussed part of *De Planctu Naturae*: what Ziolkowski terms the “grammar of sex.” Before we look at the Nature’s coursework in Rhetoric, I’d like to visit the biology department, instead.

How universal is Nature’s law? The biological argument against unnatural vice is made in the beginning of *De Planctu*, where all creation, arrayed on the goddess’ robe, is adduced as evidence of its heteronormativity. But the beastly behavior depicted really illustrates the widespread enormity of animal sexuality. The catalogue of creatures only demonstrates their monstrosity, and one must question Alain’s intention in presenting it. For example, among those animals Alain enumerates are the hare, the beaver, and the bat. These are all sexually egregious.²⁵ The hare was believed to be not only sexually prolific (and profligate), but prone to

²⁵ The imperfection of Nature’s work is conceded with “*Illic noctua tantae deformitatis sterquilinio sordescebat, ut in ejus formatione Naturam crederes fuisse somnolentam*” (There a bird of night of such deformity besets itself, that you’d believe Nature dozed in its design). Other animal show signs of “sin” that one would think only man susceptible to: the “avarice” of the jackdaw, the “jealousy” of the raven, the murderous cuckoo, and the lascivious dove “toiling in the Cyprian’s wrestling arena.” And in a very peculiar metaphor, the parrot “fashioned on the anvil of his throat a mint for human speech.” This denunciation of deception is noteworthy on two counts: its image of counterfeiting (“minting”) and the “anvil of the throat,” since elsewhere the anvil is the figure for the female sex organ (or the buttocks in male homosexual sex). Does

anal intercourse. These are all sexually egregious.²⁶ The beaver (*castor*), of course, was thought remarkable for its willingness to chew off its genitals (hence, castration) to avoid capture by hunters in pursuit of musk.²⁷ As such, it can be seen as a symbol of chastity, like Origen (or, eventually, Abelard). However, as Jean de Meun makes clear, even clerical chastity is not without its “unnatural” quality. The bat is *avis hermaphroditica*.²⁸ The phoenix “*in se mortuus, redivivus in alio, quodam naturae miraculo, se sua morte a mortuis suscitabat*” (dead in himself, lives again in another, by some miracle of Nature raised himself from the dead by his own death.” This is certainly outside the order of nature.

A “miracle of nature” is, in fact, an oxymoron, for the miraculous is precisely what is outside the order of nature. The phoenix’ parthenogenesis, while not strictly homosexual, does eschew a female partner in generation.²⁹ These are all common medieval conceptions, but Alain introduces

yet another category of sodomy lie beneath this image?

²⁶ In his *Paedagogus*, Clement of Alexandria writes, “Moses symbolically repudiated fruitless sowing, saying, “You shall not eat of the hyena or the hare.” For he did not wish men to partake of the qualities of these or to taste such wickedness themselves, since these animals are quite obsessed with sexual intercourse.” The hare, for example, is said to grow a new anus every year. Hence the prohibition against eating hare represents a rejection of pederast.” (In Boswell, p. 356) Clement goes on to remark that the hare has a double womb, so copulates when pregnant, and is therefore a symbol of general concupiscence, and can be understood to “advise abstinence from excessive desire, relations with pregnant women, reversal of roles in intercourse, corrupting of boys, adultery, and lewdness.” Quite an overload of symbolic value!

²⁷ Of course, the beaver does no such thing. Its testicles are internal, and it is that peculiar attribute that explains the myth which accounts for their “absence.”

²⁸ This refers, one assumes, to the confused status of the animal (is it bird or mammal?) rather than to any excess of sex organs. Still the word is loaded. Yet whatever surplus Alain may surreptitiously supply the bat he removes forthwith, by equating the bat with “zero.” Alain uses the Arabic term “cipher”—of such fascination for me as a figure for sexual non-entity. This is the first record of the term in the west.

²⁹ *Parthenogenesis* means “virgin birth,” and the enigma of Christ’s nativity is certainly “unnatural.” The phoenix, of course, is a figure for Christ’s resurrection, as well, and for that of all faithful Christians. This asexuality is a mystery which nature acknowledges is beyond her.

some which are peculiar to him. Alain's bestiary includes the bear, which is said to "per portas narium fetus enixa deformes" (bring forth deformed offspring through the nostrils)!³⁰ Nature's garment also features a figure of a siren which "renibus piscis, homo legebatur in facie" (was gathered to be a fish in the loins, a man in its face). Like the bat, this is another hybrid, with, perhaps, an even more weighty significance. In Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, poetry is figured as a dangerous siren tempting the author from righteousness. This will become commonplace; it appears in Petrarch and Dante. Considering the abundance of shipwreck imagery throughout *De Planctu*, this may suggest Alain's ambivalence towards his work. The poem's fourth line states, "Cum Veneris monstro naufraga turba perit" (Because of a monstrous Venus, many perish in shipwreck). Also demonstrating uncertainty or indecision is the masculinity of this monster. Emblem of perilous sexuality, Alain's siren's features are read as *homo*, human, but also male.³¹ Nature's garment also features the eagle: "Illic aquila post

"Such a birth needs no midwife of my kind. Rather I, Nature, am ignorant of the nature of this birth... [I]n these matters of the second birth the entire reasoning process of nature is brought to a standstill." (125) "By me man is born for death," she notes (confessing the inadequacy (or is it "planned obsolescence"?) of her craft, concluding, therefore, "my activity is worthless"—a strange judgment on a figure who is supposed to have such pre-eminence elsewhere. We will return to this in conclusion.

³⁰ This, according to most readings. Concerning the *portes narium* (the nasal portals), Shanzer offers a more plausible reading of *natum* (buttocks) for *narium* (nose). "The bear is known for licking its offspring into shape after they have been born and nothing is said to be rarer than the sight of a bear in labor, but it does not give birth through the nostrils. . . *Natum* is the right reading: 'The gates of birth are between the bear's buttocks.'" As I see it, this accommodates an only *slightly* less wondrous phenomenon. It may be worthwhile to point out that Alain describes the bear's *stylo linguae*, the "stylus of its tongue." This is an unusual construction, considering that elsewhere in the *de Planctu Naturae* the stylus is the figure used for the penis. Is it a telling collapsing of anatomical features? (Cf. the parrot's anvil, above.)

³¹ *Homo* can mean *vir*, as in the expression *homo naturalis*. The "natural man" is '*Instructus natura seu ea parte corporis, qua quis vir est* (Provided by nature with those parts of the body by which he is a man). Besides this definition *DuCange* supplies an instance from medieval law: "*Icelle Marotte mettoit sus au suppliant (son mary) qu'il nestoit pas Homme naturel, ne capable de mariage*" (This Marotte put it about regarding the plaintiff, her husband, that he was not a "natural man" nor competent for marriage).

iuvenerem secundo senem induens, iterum in Adonidem revertebatur a Nestore. Illic accipiter violentia et tyrannide a subditis redditus exposcebat" (Here the eagle assuming the form of a youth after that of an old man, turned back to Adonis from Nestor. Here that violent and tyrannical raptor demanded his subjects surrender tribute). The conjunction of the regal eagle with a mythological male beauty must conjure the myth of Ganymede to the reader's mind. The second sentence is usually taken to refer to another avian; *accipiter* is usually translated "hawk" or "falcon," but can be any bird of prey, including the Jovian eagle, whose tyranny and violence are manifest in his rape of Ganymede. *Exposco* is not only to demand, but to seek the surrender of someone for punishment. The tribute suggested by *redditus* might be a young man's ass or a more liquid asset.

Friggin' Phrygian

In the twelfth-century *Altercatio Ganimedis et Helene* the anonymous author stages a debate on the merits of homosexuality.³² A number of manuscripts survive, and some attempts at identifying the author have been made. Barbara Newman notes that the poem "had a wide if select clerical audience, circulating with the works of other twelfth-century Latin writers," including Alain de Lille. She goes on to remark that the work's modern editors considered the poem to be inspired by *De Planctu Naturae*, while Boswell thinks that the debt was Alain's. Peter Dronke suggested that Alain was the author of both! (Newman dismisses this notion.

³² "Ganymed und Helena," W. Wattenbach, editor, in *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur* 18, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung (1875) pp. 124–36. John Boswell provides a translation of the poem in the appendix to *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). Translations here are my own.

However, she observes that Alain did compose another poem in the same form on the relative sexual merits of maidens and married women.) Ziolkowski does not express an opinion one way or the other. The two poems have much in common, and if priority cannot be established, much can be gained by a comparison of these texts. The *Altercatio* is a satire, and it is raunchy and funny, in a manner akin to Jean de Meun. Like the *De Planctu*, the *Altercatio* features a personified Nature, who abominates Sodom. The poet's attitude toward this sin is somewhat ambivalent. As you see, I think that a reading of *De Planctu*, too, is enriched by a suggestion of ambiguity on the part of the author.

The eponymous personae of the dialogue are chosen as exemplars of male and female beauty: “*mirabaotur facies pares invenisse*” (Each marveled to find his equal in beauty). The poet spends some space on blazons of the beauty of each. His treatment of Ganymede may be more than poetic showmanship: it may express an actual appreciation for male beauty. In a curious metrum Alain contrasts the appeal of masculine and feminine beauty:

Quamvis femineae speciei supplicet omnis
Forma viri, semper hujus honore minor;
Quamvis Tyndaridi vultus formetur, Adonis
Narcissique decor victus adoret eam:
Spernitur ipsa tamen, quamvis decor ille peroret
Et formae deitas disputet esse deam.
Qua Jovis in dextra fulmen langueret, et omnis
Phoebi cessaret otia nervus agens:
Qua liber fieret servus, propriumque pudorem
Venderet Hippolytus, hujus amore fruens. (Col. 0431C)

Though all man's ccomeliness bends down
To woman's beauty, always inferior in reputation;
Though Adonis is conquered by Tyndarid Helen,
And beautiful Narcissus worships her,
She is herself spurned, although her grace persuades,
And her divine form argues that she is a goddess.
For her the thunderbolt would languish in Jupiter's right hand,
And all Apollo's potent sinews would slacken in inactivity,
A free man would become a slave, and Hippolytus would sell

His enduring modesty to enjoy her love.

These lines are peculiar, to say the least. Adonis and Narcissus were known for their insusceptibility to female beauty; likewise, Hippolytus. At best, they are figures of chastity; at worst, for sexual immaturity, indifference, or disdain. The gods' attitude to the pulchritudinous Helen is also unusual. Ostensibly meant to betoken the power of female beauty over men, the images are curiously impotent: the limp, languid lightning-bolt in Zeus' hand, the slackened strings of Apollo's lyre. "*Otia nervus agens*" (strumming his instrument in idleness) also suggests something else: jerking off.³³ Of course, Apollo would have to put down his lyre for that.

In the *Altercatio*, after comparing notes on their respective attractions, the randy Helen makes her moves on the self-impressed Ganymede. She is shocked to discover that when she lies down next to him, he positions himself before her "*sed ignorans Frigius vicem predicati/ Applicat se femine, tanquam vellet pati*" (but not knowing his ordained role, the Phrygian drives his buttocks as if he desired to be buggered). The language is drawn from grammar. The predicate (active) verb is the presumably male position. But Ganymede wishes to assume the subject position. Ziolkowski points out that the *subiecta* is that which is placed below, so there is also a notion of proper sexual position involved, as well. The passive is also the pathic. And in *predicati* (rhymed here with *pati*, to be passive, passive do we see a pun on *pedicati*? Later Ganymede observes:

Impar omne dissidet, recte par cum pari
Eleganti copula mas aptatur mari
Si nescis: articulos decet observari;

³³ Especially considering the medieval attitudes to *otium*. Idle hands, after all, are the devil's playthings. Oiseuse (Idleness) is the keeper of the garden of delights in the *Roman de la Rose*. Although not much fulminated against today, masturbation usually found its way into the categories of the taxonomy of sodomy.

Hic et hic gramatice debent copulari.

Disparity sets all apart; it is right that like be joined with like.

Male fitted to male is more elegant coupling.

If you missed it: certain points should be observed;

Grammatically, “he” ought to be connected to “him.”

Here we recognize Alain’s grammatical theme, albeit expressed more succinctly. Ganymede articulates a sexualized grammatical theory that emphasizes proper fit. (*Apto* is primarily “to fit,” while *debet* declares “it is proper, fitting,” and *recte* is “correctly, fittingly.”) In some expressions *par* is “proper, meet, fitting.” Even *elegans* evokes fitness as well as fineness.) The emphasis on copulation (*copula*, *copulari*, and *aptari*) suggests sex as well as grammar (like *conjugatio* or *declinatio*). The poet’s language also leads one to imagine what, exactly, is to fit into what. *Par cum pari*, like with like, also means companion with companion, mate with mate. Insofar as equality underlies the concept of parity, a mating between differing genders seems unlikely (as indeed, between different generations).³⁴ *Articulus* is not only the grammatical article (or the pronoun *hic*, as here) but more commonly a limb or member of the body, an obvious metaphor for penis. (Its root is *artus*, limb or sinew, hence strength.) The punning place for these parts may be seen in the word, itself: *arti culi* are tight or narrow assholes. *Recte*, seen above, means both “erect” and “tight;” it is an apt descriptor for both penis and rectum (that’s why it’s called a rectum).

In one of his own briefer summations, Alain writes:

Activi generis sexus, se turpiter horret
Sic in passivum degenerare genus.
Femina vir factus, sexus denigrat honorem,
Ars magicae Veneris hermaphroditat eum.
Praedicat et subjicit, fit duplex terminus idem,

³⁴ *Impar* indicates the dissimilar woman. The word connotes “unequal” and “less strong” and “inferior.” The disparaged disparity is not only in the bodies’ parts, but in their relative social and sexual values.

Grammaticae leges ampliat ille nimis. (Col. 0431A)

The active sex shamefully shudders
As it degenerates into the passive sex.
A man made woman, he besmirches the dignity of his sex.
Venus' witchcraft hermaphrodizes him.
He is subject and predicate: a single term does double duty,
He stretches grammar's laws to the breaking point.

Alain took this metaphor and ran with it, presumably to the delight of his scholastic readers. In fact, the *De Planctu Natura* is presented as a sort of seminar, or question-and-answer period, in which Nature acts as pedagogue. (Recall the medieval dictum, “*Pedagogus ergo sodomiticus.*”)³⁵ The classroom is an appropriate setting for a diatribe against sodomy, for the seminary is a homosocial environment in which the dangers of sodomy are clear.³⁶ Ziolkowski gives a detailed

³⁵ Priscian, the type of the grammarian for the Middle Ages, was believed to have been homosexual. This accounts for his inclusion among the sodomites of Canto XV of Dante's *Inferno*. In *Anticlaudianus'* catalogue of great grammarians, Alain disses Priscian: “*Grammaticae tractus pertractat apostata noster, Pigrus in dictis torporis somnia passus*” (Our apostate busies himself with his grammar treatise; inertly passive, torpid nonsense [infuses] his writing). *Pertracto* is to fondle, feel or touch; Wetherbee suggests it works like *pertraho* here. If so, Priscian draws out, prolongs his touching. What's more, *pertraho* is to entice, allure, or lead astray. Priscian's torpitude prompts turpitude.

³⁶ Like the barracks. Alain uses a good deal of military imagery, too. For example: “*Et quoniam apud quem desidia torpor castrametatur ab eo omnis virtutis militia relegatur otiique sterilitas pravae sobolis solet fecunditatem pregnari*” (And since all military manliness is discharged by anyone with whom the torpor of idleness pitches camp, and a sterile ease is liable to become pregnant with the fecundity of their depraved race). Or, “*Credo te in Cupidinis castris stipendiarie militantem et quadam interfamiliaritatis germanitate eidem esse connexum inextricabilem* (I believe you a to be soldier for hire in the army of Eros and are inextricably connected to him by some kind of intimate brotherhood). Besides the language of military service, we notice the idea of sex-for-pay that crops up often in *De Planctu*. Cupid's *miles stipendarius* is a mercenary in love's skirmishes, a prostitute. Isidore conflates the two professions in his *Differentiae*. In distinguishing adultery from fornication (*de Littera F*), he offers this idea: *Meretrices autem dicuntur a merendo, id est, promerendo stipendia libidinis. Unde et milites, cum stipendia accipiunt, mereri dicuntur* (*Meretrices*, whores, are so called from *merendo*, deserving merit, that is, earning the wages of lust. Likewise, *milites*, soldiers, when they receive military pay are said to merit it.)

analysis of Alain’s “grammar of sex,” which capitalizes on a twelfth-century taste for academic games such as this:

Cum enim attestante grammatica, duo genera specialiter, masculinum et femininum, ratio naturae cognoverit, quamvis dum quidam homines depauperati signaculo, juxta meam opinionem, possent neutri generis designatione censerit, tamen Cypri sub intimis admonitionibus minarum tonitru ingessi, ut in suis conjunctionibus ratione exigentiae, naturalem constructionem solummodo masculini femininique generis celebraret. (Col. 0457B–0457C)

Since, as confirmed by grammar, natural reason recognized two particular genders, masculine and feminine (although certain men deprived of sexual signs could be valued among those designated of neutral gender, in my opinion) I forced upon the Cyprian with intimate suggestions and minatory thunder that for the sake of necessity she solemnize among her conjoinings only the natural putting together of the masculine and feminine genders.

The common emphasis on Latin grammar (where nouns are gendered, and articles and adjectives must conform) may explain why some early readers considered the poems to be by the same author. Even though Ganymede’s grammatical argument is diametrically opposed to Alain’s (and his conclusion more convincing). William Burgwinkle in “Writing the Self” believes that in light of his own excesses, Alain’s grammatical prohibitions can seem “absurd, obsessive, and/or ironic.” Burgwinkle informs us that, Gautier de Coinci in his condemnation of sodomy, uses the same terms as Alain, to different effect:

Grammar couples *hic* and *hic*, but nature curses this coupling. He who loves the masculine gender over the feminine will engender everlasting death and may God erase him from his book. Nature laughs it seems to me, when *hic* and *hec* join together; but *hic* and *hic* is a lost cause, by which nature is bewildered. She beats her fists and wrings her hands.³⁷

³⁷ *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature*. University of Cambridge December 2004, p. 183. Burgwinkle admits that many of Alain’s contemporaries, including Gilles de Corbeil and Walter of Chatillon, used the “grammatical” defense of heterosexuality without irony. De Coinci’s French text reads:

La Grammaire hic à hic accouple;
Mais Nature maldist le copple.
La mort perpetuel engenre
Cil qui aimme masculin genre

Here grammar is not a reflection of divine; it is at odds law with nature. What is licit in a book is illicit in the bedroom. Barbara Newman notes, Alain “runs up against the uncomfortable fact of real grammar:”

[M]asculine nouns require masculine adjectives, and the same holds for the feminine. To evade this difficulty, Alan lets Nature create a fantastic counterfactual grammar in which all nouns are feminine, all adjectives masculine, and all verbs active and transitive. In what seems like an elaborate joke, Nature presents this outlandish grammar as a simple and normal; all deviations from it, symbolizing irregular sexual acts, constitute solecisms.³⁸

The faultiness of Nature’s argument in *De Planctu* can be seen as comical, and this is certainly one of the things that de Meun picks up on in his ridiculous treatment of the figure. I think there is little question that Alain *meant* the goddess’s lecture to be suspect, as full of holes as her gown.

Nature at Law

The *De Plantu Naturae* is usually examined as an example of the *planctus* as medieval song of mourning, or of lament at moral inequity or the decay of social order. The Cluniac Bernard of Morlaix’s *De Contemptu Mundi* (c. 1140) is among the best-known examples of the latter. Only

Plus que le feminin ne face,
Et Diex de son livre l'esface.
Nature rit, si com moi samble,
Quant hic et hec joinnent ensamble
Mais hic et hic chose est perdue,
Nature en est tost esperdue.
Ses poinz debat et tuert ses mains.

See Tony Hunt, *Miraculous Rhymes: The Writing of Gautier de Coinci*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer (2007) p. 131.

³⁸ Newman, p. 95. This author refers us to Mark Jordan’s *Invention of Sodomy in Christian Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), in which it is pointed out that “according to the rules of ordinary Latin, ‘whorish solecism’ would seem to be precisely this mixture of male with female.”

occasionally do we see it compared to the “lover’s lament,” or *plainte d’amour*. I haven’t seen it anywhere related to another sort of *planctus*: the action or claim made in a court of law (whence our word, plaintiff). This sort of complaint, could be initiated by a woman seeking redress for injury done to her through rape, in which case the remedy was marriage. Or, a suit could be lodged against a man who has reneged on his marital duties, either through desertion or failure to render the conjugal debt. Annulment or divorce was the desired outcome. I can think of any number of reasons to leave one’s wife, but impotence or homosexuality seem the most likely culprits for the inability to render her tribute. In the *Altercatio*, it seems, Helen brings such a suit (in which Nature is both correspondent and judge!):

[E]rgo Frigem refugit, Frigem execratur,
naturam vituperat, superos causatur,
quod tam pulcra facie monstrum induatur.
Res utrumque moverat in contencionem,
plus hec laudat feminam, plus hie pusionem.
judices qui terminent istam questionem,
Naturam constituant atque Rationem.

So she shrinks from the Phrygian, and curses him.
She reproaches nature, and accuses the gods,
That so fair a face should disguise a monster.
The matter moves each to fight,
The more she praises women; the more he, the male.
Nature and Reason, too, are to stand
As judges to resolve the question.

The poem ends in the marriage of Helen and Ganymede, a peculiar solution to the problem. Does Alain’s Nature feel herself dishonored in a similar way? At times, she speaks of “injury” done to her. Rather than a sin of commission, I am inclined to see one of omission (or is that emission?). If this is the case, we should expect the *De Planctu* to end in divorce, and it does. The anathema issued at the conclusion of the piece severs the sodomite from Nature.

There are other similarities between the two texts. Helen denounces Ganymede, saying

“*sexum mulieribus invides aperte. Ordo rerum vertitur et lex perit per te*” (You scorn the sex of women openly. The order of things is inverted and the law is lost in you). In this, she aligns herself with Nature, and makes an implicit connection between grammatical laws and physical ones. Helen then goes on to make the “naturalist” argument, claiming that animals do not behave in this fashion.³⁹ This is a schoolroom argument in a rustic setting,⁴⁰ but it is countered ably by Ganymede, who remarks, “*Non aves aut pecora debet imitari homo, cui datum est ratiocinari*” (Men shouldn’t imitate birds or beasts; we can reason). Ganymede makes what without doubt will henceforth be the argument employed by opponents of “unnatural” sexual activity: that man should *not* behave like animals, that—because endowed with reason—he should be above that. Of course, in Alain’s text it is reason that is the culprit (or at least one of them): it is the perversity of man’s intellect that moves him to these new conjunctions. These complications demonstrate the confusion engendered by each side of the argument—and the inadequacy of either to come to a definite conclusion.

In his *apologia* Ganymede goes too far, perhaps, in adding, “[*R*]ustici, qui pecudes possunt appellari, hii cum mulieribus debent inquinari” (Peasants—who can be called cattle—these

³⁹ “*Contra hunc hie et hec naturali flexu: / aves, fere, pecora, gaudent isto nexu*” (He and she are drawn together by natural bent./ Birds, beasts, boars, all enjoy this juncture.” This argument has had “legs,” it is still in common use today. It may have breathed its last, however, as zoologists are repeatedly demonstrating that animals of every stripe (penguins, seals, etc.) engage in homosexual activity and homosocial attachments. Progressive zoo-keepers have even permitted certain couples to raise offspring, with great success.

⁴⁰ One questions why this argument is so popular among opponents of homosexuality, for it demonstrates the uneasy alliance of Christian doctrine with “natural” order. Newman (p. 92) praises Boswell for demonstrating how “two contradictory ideas about ‘natural sexuality’ seem to have taken hold among writers at about the same time: first the notion that certain creatures were ‘innately’ homosexual and therefore to be shunned, and second, the belief that homosexuality is ‘unnatural’ because it does not occur at all among animals.” She also notes that “there was no other ethical context in which clerics taught that rational human beings should imitate irrational beasts.”

should wallow in filth with women). Later he claims, “*Approbatis opus hoc scimus approbatum, / nam qui mundi regimen tenent et primatum*” (We know this work is favored by the well-favored—those of the first rank who hold the rudder of the world).⁴¹ Here the character, if not the poet, reveals a class bias. Homosexuality is the mark of aristocracy, of refinement, of urbanity. This argument, too, is familiar, from Soviet and Communist Chinese denunciations of homosexuality as capitalist degeneracy.

Ganymede concludes, “[*L*]udus hie quem ludimus, a diis est inventus, *et ab optimatibus adhuc est retentus*” (this game we play was invented by the Gods/ And is maintained still by the best and brightest). Here he introduces the argument that causes the dreamer such trouble in Alain’s poem—the pagan deities’ participation in (and inauguration of) sodomy.

Ars(e) Poetica

After Nature’s indictment, the dreamer digresses to ask:

Miror cur poetarum commenta pertractans, solummodo in humani generis pestes, praedictarum invectiveum armas aculeos, cum et eodem exorbitationis pede, deos claudicasse legamus? Jupiter enim adolescentem Ganymedem transferens ad superna, relativam Venerem transtulit in translatum; et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi statuit praepositum, in toro per noctem sibi fecit suppositum. Bacchus etiam et Apollo, paternae cohaere-des lasciviae, non divinae virtutis imperio, sed superstitione Veneris praestigio, verterunt in feminas, pueros
mentiendo. (Col. 0451A)

I marvel that, when feeling about the fictions of poets, you mobilize that preachy pricked invective only against the pestilent tendencies of humankind. We read that the gods, too, went limping with the same deviant step. For example, in transporting the Phrygian adolescent to the upper regions, Jupiter engrafted a like-minded lust in his transference. By day, at table, he made the boy stand in front of him to quench his thirst; at night in bed he positioned the boy beneath him. Even Bacchus and Apollo—those coheirs cohered to their father’s lusts, not with the might

⁴¹ Boswell, 125.

of godly manliness, but by a trick of idolatrous lewdness, turn boys into women through deception.⁴²

Nature's response is a lengthy denunciation of poetry. Art is not seen in its typical place as nature's handmaid, but in contrast (or opposition) to it. The artistic or artificial, the man-made, is false, counterfeit, contranatural. At times, it is even equated with the supernatural, i.e. witchcraft. In this cornerstone of medieval allegorical literature, a personified Nature warns the reader about figurative, representation:

An ignoras, quomodo poetae sine omni palliationis remedio, auditoribus nudam falsitatem prostituant, ut quadam mellita dulcedine velut incantatas audientium aures inebriant? Quomodo ipsam falsitatem quadam probabilitatis hypocrisi palliant, ut per exemplorum imagines, hominum animos mognitionis incude sigillent? At, in superficiali litterae cortice falsum resonat lyra poetica, sed interius, auditoribus secretum intelligentiae altioris eloquitur, ut exteriore falsitatis

⁴² Alain continues to a display distaste for deception: *commenta* are fabrications, falsehoods, fictions (from *commisicor*, to feign or devise). The word *commenta* bears a similarity to the verb *commentor* (to prepare a speech, as in classroom exercise, sometimes in a borrowed voice), which is what Alain does throughout. The theme of falsehood is also present in the words *mentiendo*, *praestigium*, and *superstitiosae*.

Alain may be having fun with the language of classroom rhetors. The pre- and postprandial postures of Jupiter and Ganymede are conveyed in grammatical terms. *Praepositum* plays on *praepositio* (preposition) and *propositio* (the medieval designation for a sentence, or the subject-predicate that comprises its content.) A *suppositum* was the grammatical subject of a predicate. (Alain uses the word *praedictarum* in his initial question.) In later medieval sign theory, the *suppositum* is the thing referred to. Metonymy and synecdoche are examples of “improper supposition,” where the thing referenced is called by another name. *Transferens*, *transtulit* and *translatum* all suggest the rhetorical exercise of translation and the use of figurative speech. (Their root is *transfero*, one meaning of which is “to transfer meaning,” that is, apply a secondary signification.) These words have other suggestive applications. *Praepositus* also signified a provost or prefect and any number of ecclesiastic posts, as did *suppositum*. *Suppositum*, Ganymede’s nocturnal position, implies that he is placed beneath Jupiter in bed, as receptor to his raptor’s ministrations. However, the word, so like *suppositum*, suggests that Ganymede will be inserted into Zeus’ ass.

On medieval logic and sign theory see *Formalizing Medieval Logical Theories: Suppositio, Consequentiae and Obligationes* by Catarina Dutilh Novaes, Dordrecht: Springer (2007). Also, “Speaking about Signs: Fourteenth-century views on suppositio materialis” by E. P. Bos in *Der muoz mir s̄iezer worte jehēn. Liber amicorum für Norbert Voorwinden*, edited by Ludo Jongen and Sjaak Onderdelinden, Amsterdam: Rodopi (1997) pp 71–80.

abjecto putamine, dulciorem nucleum veritatis secrete intus lector inveniat.
(Col. 0451C)

Do you not know how poets prostitute naked untruth to their audience without the help of any protective cloak, or inebriate the ears of their listeners with a certain sweet charm as if with incantations? How they clothe that same falsehood with a kind of playhouse probability, where by their exemplary models, they stamp the minds of men on the anvil of gratification. Or, that in the superficial coating of literal meaning the poetic lyre resounds with falsehood, but within it declares a secret of deeper significance, so the outer shell of falsehood tossed away, the reader may discover the even sweeter kernel of truth hidden inside.

Poetry is equated with drunkenness, sorcery, wanton nakedness, an anvil (already heavily laden with sodomitical meaning), and a lyre (the instrument of the homosexual poets Orpheus and Apollo). The application of musical instruments in sexual metaphor, including the lyre, is discussed in Adams (21, 25). Of Varro's *Saturae Menippae* ("ὄνος λύρας" 368)⁴³ this fragment survives: "et id dicunt suam Briseidem producere, quae eius neruia tractare solebat" (and they say that his Briseis drew it out whenever she strummed his instrument). The lyre is elsewhere aligned with irregular sexuality when nature describes the madness of sensual delight engendered by sodomy: "*Sub delirantis Orphei lira delirat* ([Man] reels under the lyre of delirious Orpheus). Besides harping on the lyre (*delirantis, lira, delirat*), Alain plays with the base meaning of *deliro*, to go out of a furrow when plowing: Orpheus' followers deviate from the proper channels for their seed.

In the lines that ensue, Nature says there are no pagan gods, yet they populate Alain's poem, and Nature uses them allegorically in her own explanation of worldly decline.⁴⁴ In the course of

⁴³ See *M. Terentius Varro: Saturarum Menipppearum Fragmenta*, edited by Raymond Astbury, Leipzig: K.G. Saur Verlag (2002) p. 62.

⁴⁴ Natura, it might be said, is, herself, a pagan goddess. A prayer addressed to Φύσις appears in the Orphic hymns. The Chorus of Seneca's *Phaedra* (959) reveres her as "*O magna parens, Natura, deum*" (O! Nature, great mother of the gods).

the poem, Nature becomes a poet. In his seminal analysis of the *De Plantu*, Winthrop Wetherbee writes:

Nature's reply has been cited as the last word on Alain's poetic practice, and on the conception of poetic allegory that he shared with his contemporaries. But there are human problems to which poetic fable and its mythological apparatus lend themselves naturally. Nature has herself employed these resources to illustrate the corruption of human nature. That her account of poetry does not explain how true and false myths are to be distinguished is thus a crucial omission, and assumes a thematic function almost at once, in her review of the origin and corruption of human nature.⁴⁵

Nature asks, “*Quamvis ergo, ut poetae testati sunt plerique homines talibus Veneris terminis sint abusi ad litteram?*” (So what, if as poets attest there are many such men who have abused the ends and terms of Venus for literature?). The “ends of Venus are abused” by poets, who like their art are corrupt in their very nature.

Nature elaborates by naming a few “poets”: Manichaeus, Arius, Epicurus, and Aristotle. Poets are to be grouped with heretics—Manicheans had a negative view of Nature—gluttons, and philosophers. One wonders why Aristotle comes in for such a drubbing here, being the greatest natural philosopher known to the West. Of course, the naturalist may frequently injure Nature in his investigations, and his greatest sin may be in making the secrets of nature an end in themselves, as if Nature, herself, held the answers to man's questions. But if she doesn't, why should she be set up as any kind of authority?

Natural History

As I noted earlier, the poet begins by asking, “*Heu! quo naturae secessit gratia?*” (Alas! Where has Nature's favor withdrawn?). This contradicts the goddess' own claim that *she* has been

⁴⁵ Page 194.

abandoned by mankind. Later, however, Nature incriminates herself. Almost all readers remark the curious course of nature's history, wherein she relinquishes her duty as God's vice-regent in favor of a life of ease: "*Mihique in aethereae regionis/ amoenante palatio placuit commorari*" (It pleased me to loiter in the pleasant palace of the ethereal regions).⁴⁶ What is one to make of this delinquent? What does the allegory intend? Nobody seems to want to address this issue. I can see a few possible interpretations, none entirely satisfying. First, the history may be a secular recasting of the Genesis myth, in which Nature's dereliction is meant to coincide with man's fall.⁴⁷ In contrast to the popular conception of a "fallen Nature," the consequence of man's disobedience is a fall "from nature." In effect, she is seen to remain in Eden, while man in his exile must "work" at reproduction, and new "unnatural" or nonnatural incentives to intercourse must be implemented. This would explain the introduction of the erotic characters (Venus, Hymenaeus, and Cupid). But it doesn't speak very forcefully for the desirability of the unions. Second, the tale gibus well with a Manichean view of Nature. Certain Gnostic sects (including the Cathars, against whom Alain wrote) maintained that nature and matter were in essence Evil. They held it was incapable of producing anything unsullied, and that by necessity it erred. (Hence the inevitability of Nature's pen's mis-scription). By their lights, man must be rescued

⁴⁶ This *locus amoenus* may not be entirely anodyne. A *palatium* is also a stand of stakes (Latin *palus*). Perhaps the reader is to imagine this playground as teeming with *phalloi*. Such an understanding would be bolstered by the *amona* occluded in *amoenante*; an *amona* is *calamus* or *Calamus mensurae*. I also suspect that *aethereae* may indicate not only the celestial location of this paradise, but its character: it is a *hetaeria*, a fraternity or brotherhood.

⁴⁷ This is how Wetherbee views the *fabula*. In his exposition of the text as a vision of *restauratio*, he writes, "[W]hat takes place is the imaginative reconstruction of man's sexual nature as it had existed before the Fall." (Wetherbee, p. 199) Later he concludes, "For all virtue which is now infused into man by grace was originally present *per naturam*; and as Alain explains in the treatise *De virtutibus et vitiis*, if Adam had not succumbed to temptation, these natural virtues would have been sufficient by themselves to gain him eternal life." (p. 209)

from Nature. I think it is entirely possible that Alain intends to reprove the goddess, that he desires a reprieve from Nature. But where should he turn?

Natural Language

Talis monstruosorum hominum multitudo, totius orbis amplitudine degrassatur, quorum fascinante contagio, castitas venenatur. Eorum siquidem hominum qui Veneris profitentur grammaticam, alii solummodo masculinum, alii feminum, alii commune, sive promiscuum genus familiariter amplexantur: quidam vero quasi heteroclii genere, per hiemem in feminino, per aestatem in masculino genere irregulariter declinantur. Sunt qui in Veneris logica disputantes, in conclusionibus suis, subjectionis, praedicationisque legem relatione mutua sortiuntur. Sunt, qui vicem gerentes supposito, praedicari non norunt. Sunt, qui solummodo praedicantes, subjecti subjectionem legitimam non attendunt. Alii autem Diones regiam ingredi dignantes, sub ejusdem vestibulo ludum lacrymabilem comitantur. (Col. 0450C) ⁴⁸

⁴⁸ This great multitude of men monsters are scattered hither and thither over the whole expanse of earth and from contact with their spell, chastity itself is bewitched. Of those men who subscribe to Venus' procedures in grammar, some closely embrace those of masculine gender only, others those of feminine gender, others those of common or epicene, gender. Some indeed, as though belonging to the heteroclite class show variations in deviation by reclining with those of feminine gender in Winter and those of masculine gender in Summer. There are some who in the disputationes in Venus' school of logic, in their conclusions reach a law of interchangeability of subject and predicate. There are those who take the part of subject and cannot function as predicate. There are some who function as predicate only, but have no desire to have the subject term duly submit to them. Others, disdaining to enter Venus' hall, practice a deplorable game in the vestibule of her house.

Among other reasons, this is interesting because it shows Alain making a very thorough investigation of the *kinds* of the *vitium contra natura*. This vice is various. In the next century Aquinas would offer another anatomy of sodomy. His four parts were masturbation, bestiality, homosexuality, and non-reproductive heterosexual activity (anal, oral, or *coitus interruptus*). Such categorizing (and valorizing) continues to this day, and we recognize Alain's parade of perverts. He presents heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality (classification by object choice). And butch—or “straight-acting”—and femme (not sexual activity, really, but gendered behaviour). He also gives us what looks like top, bottom, and “versatile” (preferred sexual position, which it would seem is a seasonal variation). And, finally, the lonely onanist. The varieties of sexual experience remain relatively constant. Alain does not seem to be aware of “bi-curious,” so common in modern personal ads, but he certainly knew “gay for pay,” of which, more below.

This is all a not-very-clear trope which relies on the subordination (*suppositio*) of Latin terms in a sentence to be understood. This no doubt delighted the original scholastic audience. But its logic is not airtight. The counter-argument could be made (and indeed was) that it is not *unlike* terms that should be joined together (masculine subject and feminine predicate) but like with like (masculine substantive with masculine adjective), which has the advantage of working across languages—in Latin and French. Furthermore, the entire premise concedes to language a natural status, which ought to be recognized as man-made, conventional, and as likely as its creators to fall into error. (This despite what certain linguists might claim for the universal structures of language.) Alain certainly recognized the fallibility or falsity of language elsewhere, when writing on the ineffability of God, and the incommensurability of language to embrace His Truth. (There is a strange connection between the godly and the sinful, the unutterable and the unspeakable.)

Astonishingly, Nature pardons herself for speaking too plainly!

Ne igitur mireris, si in has verborum profanas exeo novitates, cum profani homines profanius audeant debacchari. Talia enim indignanter eructo, ut pudici homines pudoris characterem revereantur; impudici vero ab impudentiae lupanaribus arceantur. Mali enim cognitio, expediens est cautela, quae culpabili nota inverecundiae cauteriatos puniat; et ab ejusmodi immunes praemiet.

(Col. 0450C– 0450D)

Do not marvel then, that I trespass with this novel and profane language, when profane men dare debauchery so profanely. I shamefully belch forth such words so that bashful men may revere shame's seal, so shameless men are excluded from the brothels of shamelessness. The recognition of evil is a useful precaution: it may punish the guilty, branded with the blameworthy mark of immodesty, while the guiltless are rewarded.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ An alternative version of this passage ends “*et ab ejusmodi immunes praemiet et cautelae armatura immunes praemuniat*” (and thus the innocent are rewarded and fortified with the armor of precaution. (See Wetherbee, p. 98). This has comic potential since a *cotella* is a short tunic and *praemunio* is to secure in front: The guiltless are rewarded and provided a short tunic as armor to protect them in front.

The pomposity of pedants is a sure-fire comic device. Add that to the ease with which one can dismantle the argument and we should ask ourselves, “To what extent was this meant humorously?” Within a hundred years Jean de Meun would be lampooning this uncouth speech in *Roman de la Rose*. A greater understanding about the possible meanings of the *Roman de la Rose* may be gained if we keep in mind its probable roots in Alain’s text about homosexuality. Likewise, note the seeming similarities between De Meun’s poem and the *Altercatio*, where Ganymede and Helen make this exchange,

Ad loquendum turpia venimus parati,
non erit hic aliquis locus honestati.
pudor et religio sint post terga dati:
neque parcam virginī neque veritati

Quo me vertam nescio, nam si vice pari
turpia non dixero, dicar superari;
quod si tibi studeam verbis adequari,
meretricem sapient tam impure fari.

We came prepared to speak filthy things,
There will be no place here for the bashful.
Shame and piety are pushed behind us,
I will spare neither virgin nor truth.

I know not where to turn, for if I do not speak
vile things in turn, I’ll be said to have been vanquished;
But if I strive to match you word for word,
I will seem a whore to have spoken so impurely.

Helen recognizes a real dilemma. One with implications beyond immodesty or damage to her reputation. How does one discuss or describe the “unspeakable”? And what are the dangers to oneself or one’s audience in exposing vice plainly? They may become inured to it, if it becomes too familiar, if its horror is removed or palliated. Or (which may be worse) they may be drawn to it, if it is acknowledged to be (or made to seem) attractive. The producers of penitential manuals in the Middle Ages were on constant guard, lest in their discovery of sins priest reveal them to

their penitents, instead. By asking, “Have you ever...?” The priest may alert his auditor to a heretofore unknown (hence, untried) vice. Like a retailer’s mailing, a catalogue of sins can act as an advertisement. Those charged with the eradication of evil, may have gone a long way in the propagation of it.

In the *De Planctu*, Nature takes this vow:

Ab altiori enim sumens initium, excellentiori quaesito meae volo narra-tionis seriem contexere. Nolo enim ut prius plana verborum planitie ex-planare proposita, vel profanis verborum novitatibus profanare profana; verum, pudenda aureis pudicorum verborum phaleris inaurare, variisque venustorum verborum coloribus investire. Consequens est enim, praedictorum vitiorum scoriam deauratis lectionibus purpurare, vitiosumque fetorem verborum imbalsamare mellifluo, ne si tanti sterquilinii fetor in nimiae promulgationis aures evaderet, populum ad indignationis stomachum, et nauseantis vomitum invitaret.

(Col. 0452D – 0453A)

Beginning from a higher place, I want to weave the thread of my response to your question in a superior style. I will not as before plainly explain my design in plain words, nor profane the profane with the novelty of profane words. Rather, I will gild shameful things with the gold plate of modest words and clothe them with the multicolored colors of elegant words. For it is fitting that the dross of the vices we named be painted with spangled language and to perfume the vicious stench with mellifluous words, lest the stench of such dungheaps waft too far on the winds of speech, provoking the offended stomachs of the people to spew disgusting vomit.

Nature’s program seems counter-productive! Should she sugar-coat shit? Why not prompt nausea as a sort of aversion therapy? This looks like exhibition, not prohibition. I should think she would want to induce vomiting, rather than making the vice palatable. Especially considering how savory the sin seems elsewhere. (Have I succumbed to an inevitable association of Sodom and salt?) Continuing in this vein, Nature acknowledges the occasional need for profanity, but resists its pull:

Sed tamen aliquando, ut superius libavimus, quia rebus, de quibus loquimur, cognatos oportet esse sermones, rerum informitati locutionis debet deformitas conformari. In sequenti vero tractatu, ne locutionis cathephaton lectorum offendat auditum, vel in ore virginali locum collocet turpitudo, praedictis vitiorum monstris euphoniae orationis volo pallium elargiri.

Nevertheless, sometimes, as we had a taste of before, words should accord with the things of which we speak. A deformity of diction should conform to the ugliness of things. Truly, in the discourse which follows, so that no foulness of speech offend the ear of the reader, and so that filth occupy no place in a virgin's mouth, I want to cover the aforesaid monsters of vice with the cloak of nice-sounding speech.

The mouth, as the place of speech, is emphasized here by the alliterative repetition of *log/loc*: *loquimur*, *locutionis*, *locutionis*, and *locum collocet*. At first, the *Altercatio*'s Helen makes a similar protest, with the same reference to a virgin's mouth:

O nisi reprimerer tenero pudore,
iam sine rhetorico loquerer colore.
sed sermone pudor est uti turpiore:
male sedent turpia virginis in ore.

Oh, were I not restrained by genteel decency,
I would speak without rhetorical color,
But it is shameful to use filthy language,
And foul words sit ill in the mouth of a virgin.

And her demmural excites this exchange:

“Parce loqui turpiter, parce loqui dure:
loquere modestius, o puer impure!
deferre virginis non est tibi cure,
defer saltem superis, defer et Nature.”

“Si verborum faleris sit res palliata,
fallere nos potent feditas ornata;
sed non erit scoria per me deaurata,
fas est ut materie verba sint cognata.”

“lam pudoris pallium procul abiectura,
quia cogis, amodo nude sum dictura:
cum vos illa copulat heresis impura,
Veneris et lacrimam perdis inter crura,
ha! si nescis, ibi fit hominis iactura.
sermo quidem durus est, sed res magis dura.”

“Forebear to speak so filthily, so rudely:
Speak more modestly, you impure pup!
If you don't care to defer to a maiden,

Defer, at least, to the Gods and to Nature.”

“If the subject is to be cloaked in a pile of words,
Ornamented filth will be able to fool us.
But dross will not be gilded by me,
Subject and words should be alike.”

“Because you force me, the sheath of shame
is cast far away. Now I speak nakedly,
When that impure heresy joins you in copulation,
You lose the tear of Venus between your thighs.
Oh! There, if you do not know it, a man is tossed away,
However harsh the language, the thing itself is harsher.

Coerced by Ganymede, Helen will not equivocate. She demonstrates another common conception about the relation of language to the world, a correspondence between *res* and *verbum*. Yet the word is not precisely the thing, itself. It is more than language, so language is curtailed. At the last she recognizes the inadequacy of circumlocution (or metaphor), and by speaking forthrightly she is able to identify our sin to the sinner, who succumbs.

Inauditum facinus puer ut attendit,
linguam Stupor implicat, rubor os ascendit,
tepidus ex oculis furtim ros descendit:
rationis indigens sese non defendit.
Silet ille.

When the boy hears the unheard-of crime,
A stupor stops his tongue, a blush rises on his cheeks.
Furtively, a faint, dew descends from his eyes.
Wanting an argument, he does not defend himself.
He is silent.⁵⁰

Silence and stupor are the attendants on this sin. However, Ganymede’s shameful stupor suggests sex. *Rubor* here, as in other instances, hints at a ruddy woody, which is emphasized by

⁵⁰ Note the language of stupor, and the silence which is the proper attitude toward this vice. The *vitium nefandum* is not to be spoken of, the sign of its remission is silence. Before his act of excommunication, Genius enjoins silence. Long before that, the dreamer in Alain’s poem will fall silent, as well.

the rising of *ascendo* (and, possibly, the enflamed inflammation of *accendo*). That metaphorical *ros*, too, is ambiguous: the dew is teardrop and precum. “*Iam cognosco facinus*,” Ganymede says, “*Iam quid sit addisco*” (Only now I know sin. Now I have learned what it is). I see the penitential model at work here, with Helen in the role of confessor. Likewise, Apollo and Jupiter—the “gay” gods in attendance—submit. And, one presumes, the audience *tout court*, for the poet enjoins: “*erubescant Sodome, fleant Gomorei, / convertatur quisquis est reus huius rei*” (Let the Sodomites blush; the Gomorrhans, weep. Let whoever is guilty of this thing be turned away). Perhaps most tellingly, the poet concludes with a line that may include himself among the miscreants: “God, if ever I commit it, have mercy on me!” Boswell (p.260) provides an interesting variant to the poem (which may represent the earliest version): it ends with the author’s prayer “*Deus, hoc si fecero, miserere mei. Deus, hoc si fecero, sis oblitus mei.*” (O god, if ever I commit this sin, have mercy on me! O god, if ever I commit this sin, overlook my transgression). As Newman (p. 350) notes, “it is not clear whether the poet meant to confess a personal weakness for Ganymede’s sin or to profess his utter abhorrence of it—or both at once.” That one may disguise personal interest or involvement through denunciation is not a new idea. A few medieval writers on sodomy suggested as much:

Multos invenies quibus exsecrabile verbis
est puerile nephas, set non a rebus abhorrent

You will find many who declare boy-love monstrous
But they do not shudder at the deeds.

And:

Plures, ut celent quod amant faciuntque libenter
id detestantur verbis, quo rebus habundant.

Many, to hide what they love and do joyfully,

Abominate with words what abounds in deeds.⁵¹

I see similar ambiguity in Alain's opus. He is not unlike today's closeted homosexuals who pontificate and legislate against homosexual liberties, either to hide their predilections or out of genuine confliction. De Lille might be termed a "cloister case."

Gay for Pay

In the surprising conclusion to Alain's first metrum, he introduces an unexpected element—money:

Sed male naturae munus pro munere donat,
Cum sexum lucri vendit amore suum.
A Genii templo tales anathema merentur,
Qui Genio decimas, et sua jura negant. (Col. 0432A)

He ill pays nature's debt who does so for pay,
When he sells his sex for love of money.
They deserve to be excommunicated from the Temple of Genius,
Who deny Genius his rights and tithes.

With language like *munus*, *munere*, *dono*, *lucrum*, *vendo*, and *mereo*, we encounter a cultural equation between sodomy and prostitution. We've seen this before in the overuse of terms like *bursus*, *saccus*, *scrotum*, etc. Or in the extensive use of the metaphor of coins for cum. (In a few lines Nature will console Largitas: "*Ille etiam qui excedentis prodigalitatis effluxu naturae donis abutitur, fortunae muneribus damno nimiae dilapidationis exuitur*" (He who abuses the gifts of Nature with an emission of excessive prodigality, is stripped of the rewards of Fortune by his excessive squandering). It is not surprising that sexual commerce plays so large a part in a text consumed by issues of conversion. In Alain's elaborate metaphor sodomy is a sort of monetary

⁵¹ Poems taken from a 12th- or 13th-century manuscript. They appear in Dümmler, p. 360, and also in Stehling, p. 111. Note in each of these quips, the juxtaposition of the words *verbis* and *rebus*. This seems suggestive to me since the "thing" is notoriously without a "word" to designate it.

exchange, another kind of bourse. I'll go further: metaphor, itself, in which like things are joined to like, or juxtaposed, is sexually suspect. Alain says as much: "*Praevia igitur theatalis oratio joculatoriis evagata lasciviis*" (The preceding vulgar discourse, then, digressed into lascivious jest). The entire *De Planctu* is a sodomitical enterprise.

The sodomite, we are told, is "*pudoris trabea denudatus, impudicitiaeque meretricali prostibulo prostitutus*" (stripped of the mantle of decency, and prostituted in the skanky whorehouse of unchastity). After a lengthy enumeration of classical types of "sodomy"—including Helen's harlotry, Pasiphae's bestiality, and Myrrha's incest—Alain then digresses:

Virginis in labiis cur basia tanta quiescunt,
Cum reditus in eis sumere nemo velit?
Queis impressa semel, mellirent oscula succo,
Queis mellita darent, mellis in ore favum.
Spiritus exiret ad basia deditus ori,
Totus et in labiis luderet ipse sibi.
Ut dum sic moriar, in me defunctus, in illa
Felici vita perfruar alter ego. (Col. 0431D)
Why do so many kisses die on virgin lips,
And no one want to take them in return?
Lips once pressed, would give juicy kisses
Honey-sweet, on the tongue like honey in the comb,
The spirit yielding to the mouth would gush forth in kisses
All at once, and would play about on those lips.
And though I die, myself discharged, another I
Would enjoy a fruitful life in her.

The language here strikes me as peculiarly sexual, and—given the conjunction around the mouth—perhaps, sodomitical. What are we to make of this life spirit "playing" on the lips? What is this *favus*, honeycomb, which is so full of *mel* (*mellirent*, *mellita*, *mellis*, even *semel*)? Elsewhere, "honey" seems to be a figure for male ejaculate. The moisture of these kisses may be more than saliva: *sucus* is juice, sap, and, tropologically, vigor and rigor. In *DuCange* *succus* is *mons*, *collis*, *sommet de la tête*, *vertex*; all metaphors for the male organ. So, the *succus* here may be both semen and the "mountain" it erupts from. And what of the pressure that prompts the spirit's issuing forth?

Succo is “to suck,” an act more likely than osculation to cause ejaculation. (A measure of disgust for semen may be seen in another meaning of *succus*: *stercus, lutum, cœnum*.) The “happy life” that appears here is Latin euphemism for ejaculation. Strangely, it appears again in the final line of Alain’s poem. Is his dream cut short by nocturnal emission? What is Alain’s “alter ego”? Is it his offspring, his genius, his genitalia?

Alain resumes his classical catalogue with:

Narcissus etiam sui umbra alterum mentita Narcissum, umbratiliter occupatus, seipsum credens esse alterum se, de se sibi amoris incurrit periculum. Multi etiam alii juvenes mei gratia pulchritudinis honore vestiti, debriato amore pecuniae, suos Veneris malleos in incudum transtulerunt officia. (Col. 0450B)

Narcissus was another Narcissus in the lying shadow. Engrossed in shadows, believing himself to be another self, he incurred danger to himself in loving himself. Many other young men, too, by my favor decked out in the gift of beauty, drunk with the love of money, have transferred the functions of their venereal hammers into the anvil.

All this shows Alain’s familiarity with Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, where, of course, these same figures appear in the run-up to the tale of Orpheus and his inauguration of the practice of homosexuality. Besides its emphasis on translation, this entertains a notion of the other which is also the same—and what, after all, is metaphor?

Ganymede is next adduced as a purveyor of perversion. Curiously, his fellow Trojan Paris is counted among that band of outsiders. (One would think he would be the last to need to establish his heterosexual *bona fides*.) To think that poor Helen has to exchange one sodomite for another!

Non modo Tyndaridem Phrygius venatur adulter,
Sed Paris in Paridem monstra nefanda parit.
Non modo per rimas rimatur basia Thysbes
Pyramus, huic Veneris rimula nulla placet.
Non modo Pelides mentitur virginis actus,
Ut sic virgineum se probet esse virum;
Sed male naturae munus pro munere donat,
Cum sexum lucri vendit amore suum. (Col. 0432A)

No longer does the adulterous Phrygian hunt Helent,
But Paris spawns unspeakable monsters in Paris.
Pyramis no longer seeks Thisbe's kisses through a cleft,
Non modo Tyndaridem Phrygius venatur adulter,
No little cleft of Venus is pleasing to him.
Achilles no longer plays a virgin's part
So he may prove himself a man to virgins,
He ill pays nature's debt who does so for pay,
When he sells his sex for love of money.

In the *Altercatio Helen* (ll. 163-64) laments that boys sell their charms, without real desire for homosexual sex: “*voluptatem puer hie ullam non attendit, unde multo gravius peccat et offendit*” (This boy responds to no desire, / wherefore he sins and offends more gravely). This is a decidedly pre-modern opinion. Today, it seems, money is ample justification for any behavior. On contemporary “hustler apps” one finds a preponderance of young men who maintain that they are straight and only engage in prostitution for the financial rewards, and the relatively little exertion required.⁵² Ganymede (ll. 165-68) acknowledges,

Odor lucri bonus est, lucrum nemo vitat:
Nos, ut verum fatear, precium invitat.
Hunc, qui vult ditescere, ludum non dimittat:
Pueros hie evehit, pueros hie ditat.

The scent of money is good; no one avoids gain.
If I speak truth, profit appeals to us.
He who wants to get rich won't give up the game:
Who pays the boys gets a rise out of boys.

What are we to make of this? If nothing else, it demonstrates that there was a market for male beauty. (Perhaps, around churches: *precium invitat* seems to mean “money summons us,” but

⁵² Some of these boys, at least, must be telling the truth. A few will produce pictures of girlfriends and children. The attraction for the johns is, in fact, that these boys are not inclined to engage in this activity on their own. One wonders if this added illicit pleasure was available to medieval patrons, if one buys the notion that sexual desire is not innate.

may also suggest, “prayer attracts us.”) Helen’s language may owe something to one of the Bible’s injunction against sodomy, which many have interpreted as a prohibition against temple prostitution. The notion of biblical temple prostitution may lie behind Helen’s charge that

Subtus esses utinam planus et apella,
et ibidem fieret mulieris cella,
ut natura vindice fieres puella,
qui nature turpiter indixisti bella.

Below, you strive to be smooth and polished,
so that it might become like a woman’s shrine,
To become a girl in revenge against nature,
You wage filthy wars against nature.

Helen’s altar imagery is picked up by Ganymede, who prays “[A]bsit ut habeam mulieris *cellam*” (God forbid that I should have a woman’s shrine). At this point the language of the debate becomes much coarser and more comical in its invective. “*Vos qui vobis*,” Helen rails, “*maribus mares applicant, / qui prodigialiter viros deviratis, / nocte vos et pueros fede maculatis / mane, sed hoc taceo, nefas est in stratis*” (You men who apply yourselves to males, who wastefully—monstrously—emasculate men, at night both you and your boys are stained with filthiness; come day—but my lips are sealed—the unspeakable is splattered on the sheets).⁵³ This alternation of holy language and baser things may be another inspiration for Jean de Meun’s exchange about *coillons* and *reliques* in the *Roman de la Rose*.

If sodomy can be aligned with poetry, Nature is at her most poetic when asked to describe Love. In Metre 5 of the *De Planctu*, Alain tenders a *tour de force* denunciation of Love, which

⁵³ “Ganymed und Helena,” W. Wattenbach, editor, in *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur* 18, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung (1875) pp. 124–36. Helen feigns modesty around a subject which should go unspoken (*taceo, nefas*), but her diatribe is in fact long-winded, indicating thrice the unnamed, unspeakable sinners (*vos vobis, maribus mares*, and *vos et pueros*). The imprecise *nefas* gestures toward silence, but by omitting to name what, exactly, is on the bedcovers, she multiplies the signs of sin (the relicts of anal sex might be semen, shit, or blood).

despite its excess is a remarkable piece of poetry. Developing a classical model, Alain places in Nature's mouth an extended portrait in verse. Its principal characteristic is antiphrasis, in which contradictory terms are yoked together. Love is, for example "elated sadness," and "living death" and "playful pain" (*tristities laeta, mors vivens, jocosa poena*). Besides these discrete descriptions which combine two terms, we are treated to compounded contradictions like *instabilis ludus, stabilis delusio* and *dulce malum, mala dulcedo* (unstable play, stable delusion; seet sin, sinful sweetness). This Love, characterized as monstrous and to be shunned, is precisely the joining of unlike parts—hardly an endorsement of heterosexual intercourse!

In the *Distinctiones* Alain reveals more about his attitude towards Love. Under *Amor* we are first told the word signifies base desire or lust (*cupiditas*). A more charitable interpretation is allowed where the word can be construed to refer to Christ or the Holy Spirit. Finally, Alain offers a positive example of simple human affection. This is not drawn from the Song of Songs, as we might expect; it is not an image of heterosexual emotion, at all. On the contrary, we are shown David's affection for Jonathan from book of Samuel: "*Dicitur naturalis affectus, unde in libro Regum: Doleo super te, frater mi Jonatha, amabilis valde super amorem mulierum*" (It means natural affection, whence we read in the Book of Kings: 'I suffer over you, my brother Jonathan, who were lovable in the extreme, surpassing the love of women'). De Lille elides "*decore nimis*" ("exceedingly handsome") in the description of Jonathan. Perhaps the suggestion of such strong emotion was troublesome enough, without the additional scruple that the deceased's beauty was a *desideratum*. David's lament is twice called a *planctus*.

Alain shows himself a connoisseur of male beauty in his description of Reason and Hymen, attendants on Nature and Venus. Reason is of such beauty that the dreamer cannot bear to look upon him. (Socrates mentions this reaction to male beauty as the first step *en route* to Wisdom.)

Hymen, for all his vaunted masculinity—"Hujus in facie nulla femineae mollitiae vestigia resultabant" (No evidence of feminine softness leapt from his face)—often comes dangerously close to effeminacy:

Caesaries inducias adepta litigii, artificiosi pectinis fatebatur industriam, moderatae tamen comptionis libramine jacebat ornata, ne si comptionibus vagaretur anomalis, in femineam demigrare videretur mollitiem. Et ne frontis aream comae sepeliret nubecula, forficis morsum capillorum sentiebat extremitas. Hujus facies, prout virilis dignitas exposcebat, a nulla pulchritudinis gratia deviabat. (Col. 0472A)

However, his hair had reached a truce with tangling, and bespoke the artful industry of the comb. It lay handsomely arranged by a moderate combing. For if it were to wander in irregular ringlets it would seem to stray into effeminate softness. And, lest a cloud of hair overshadow his brow, the ends of his hair had felt the scissors' bite. As manly dignity ordained, his face lacked no aspect of beauty.

Exactly such excessive care for coiffure is condemned elsewhere:

Alii vero sua corpora femineis compositionibus nimis effeminant, qui suorum capillorum conciliorum pectinis subsidio in tanta pace conciliant, ut ne lenis aura in eis possit suscitare tumultum: luxuriantis etiam super-cilii fimbrias forficis patrocinio demetunt, aut ab ejusdem silva superflua exstirpando decerpunt; pullulanti etiam barbae crebras novaculae appon-unt insidias, ut nec eadem paululum audeat pullulare... (Col. 0468A)

Others effeminate their bodies with feminine attire. With the assistance of a comb, they reconcile the assemblage of their hair into such peace, that no mild breeze can excite disorder among them. They shear the luxurious fringe of their eyebrows with scissors, or pluck out by the roots the same overgrown wood. They apply a razor to the thickly sprouting beard lest it dare to shoot forth ever so little.

In addition to his *peignure*, Hymen is a little too fond of little rings (*annuli*) and expensive clothing. Still, to confirm his utter masculinity, we are told of his relentless growth of beard, and his eternal battle with this barbarity. (Also condemned in others) More illuminating still, is the variable size of Hymen, himself. "Appearing suddenly and to [the dreamer's] amazement," Hymen is at first short and insignificant (*quantitas minor humilius*), then his size increases (*nunc*

*audaci proceritate quantitatis) until he finally rivals the giants (*giganteis contendebat excessibus*).* The language suggests length as much as height, and there is even a hint of protrusion. This tumescence makes Hymen yet another personified phallus among the personae of the poem. Alain cannot seem to help himself from introducing these elements into the poem (although an accurate approximation of the familiar unwilled sexual intrusions into the dream-state).

In this description of Love, Cupid (who is elsewhere legitimized) bears a great resemblance to the illegitimate offspring of Venus: Jocus. This is another of the characteristic doublings in the *De Planctu*. Yet Alain goes even further: In the course of Nature's description of Love, the god undergoes a transformation: Cupid becomes Venus. The dreamer is warned against the god of love and told to flee him. Suddenly, he is urged

Si vitare velis Venerem, loca, tempora vita,
Nam locus et tempus, pabula donat ei.
Si tu persequeris, sequitur; fugiendo fugatur;
Si cedis, cedit; si fugis, illa fugit. (Col. 0456B)

If you wish to avoid Venus, shun her times and places,
For place and time give her sustenance.
Pursue, and she comes behind; fleeing, she is put to flight
If you yield, she withdraws; shun her, she flies away.

Such a transformation is typical of Love. Nature asks this rhetorical question: “Does not desire, performing miracles, to use antiphrasis, change the shape of all mankind? Though monk and adulterer are opposite terms, he forces both to exist together in the same subject.” Could this be confession, was Alain such an “adulterate” monk? Concerning the “times” and “places” of Love: a district for homosexual prostitution sprung up around the University of Paris around this time. Did Alain ever find himself there? Did he ever lose himself there?

The first line of Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore* (ca. 1185), which answers the question *Quid sit amor* (What is love?), declares: “*Amor est passio quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus*” (Love is a certain innate passion proceeding from the sight of and immoderate meditation on the beauty [or body] of the opposite sex). It seems odd to me that the contemplation of beauty as the germ of love should be forestalled by the incompatibility of the body of the object to conform to the subject's in a potential and purely hypothetical future sexual engagement. Andreas seems to be discouraging his readers from the outset: "Don't bother to look. . ." Of course, the *De Amore* is a "practical" guide. Andreas also emphasizes the age of masculine sexual maturity (eighteen years) ostensibly to define or identify love's proper subjects, but perhaps to foreclose thought of adolescents as suitable *objects* of love.

Andreas' first principle and its casual insistence on the sexual alterity of the love object might go unnoticed or pass as merely formulaic or unthinking. I conjecture that it is reactionary; one can deduce that Andreas' prioritizing of sexual difference stems from a contrary (and prior) claim —tacit or explicit—that love may involve partners of the same sex.⁵⁴ So intent is Andreas in affirming this (or denying *that*) that he reiterates the claim as the first law of his second chapter, *Inter quos possit esse amor*⁵⁵ (Between whom love is possible):

Hoc autem est praecipue in amore notandum, quod amor nisi inter diversorum sexuum personas esse non potest. Nam inter duos mares vel inter duas feminas

⁵⁴ A look at “The Knight’s Tale” could be productive here, insofar as it shows how heterosexuality is constructed in opposition to (and subsequent to) homosexuality.

⁵⁵ The most popular translation of this text renders this as "Between what persons Love May Exist." This may suggest that the translator recognized the *De Amore* as the regulatory text that, to some extent, it is. All this is very peculiar in a text which is dedicated, after all, to the promotion of illicit unions. Of course, this "commitment" to unlawful sexual practices goes by the wayside in the third book, a sort of palinode where Andreas reproves all that he has said before and urges flight from amorous intrigue. A psychologically inclined reader might question Andreas' method in this final book, which culminates in fulmination against women (the sort of stuff familiar to readers of Jerome's "Against Justinian" or "The Wife of Bath's Prologue").

amor sibi locum vindicare non valet; duae namque sexus eiusdem personae nullatenus aptae videntur ad mutuas sibi vices reddendas amoris vel eius naturales actus exercendos. Nam quidquid natura negat, amor erubescit amplecti.⁵⁶

Now, if it "goes without saying" that love is a heterosexual endeavor, why this categorical insistence? Were others making counter-claims? (Andreas' dictum amounts to a negative definition along the lines of Petrarch's "love is not love, etc."). It perplexes me that one of the foundations of the modern concept of the erotic (romantic or courtly love) must establish itself so insistently (and so soon) in opposition to same-sex attraction or action. What is most interesting for our study here, perhaps, is Andreas' introduction of nature into his treatise on love, and the explicit complicity of Amor and Natura that he makes. This is in direct opposition to Alanus' conception of the role of these two in human affairs. For Alanus, or his spokeswoman, love and nature do not go hand-in-hand. And it is the poet's interest in Cupid which prompts one of Nature's severest criticisms and one of her most excessive rants. However, note that in Andreas' formulation the stress is on technical aspects of love. The emphasis is on conformity of bodies. There is no mention made of the teleological argument, that the "natural" end of sex is procreation. Again, not surprising in a document that encourages non-conjugal conjugations. Let it be said, though, that this sort of approach while invoking the "natural" argument, almost completely undercuts it. Andreas' text is not intrinsically "moral." It might be worthwhile to point out that the text, which began by repudiating homosexuality, climaxes in an exhortation to the reader (Gualterius/Walter) to prepare for the mystic union with his *Sponsus*—the bridegroom

⁵⁶ Now, in love you should note first of all that love cannot exist except between persons of opposite sexes. Neither between two men nor two women can love find a place, for we see that two persons of the same sex are not apt to bestow each other the exchanges of love or for practicing the acts natural to it. Whatever nature forbids, love is embarrassed to embrace.

Christ! So the entire text is framed by homoerotic considerations. The circularity, itself—my end is my beginning—wherein text becomes *ouroboros*, may have homoerotic implications.

It has been suggested that Andreas knew *De Planctu*, and that parts of his text were written in response to it. At one point he says he doesn't want to be believed to be one of those who "accuse nature." (*Sed haec omittamus ad praesens, ne qualitercunque credamur in eis accusare naturam.*) This brings up one possible reading of *De Planctu*, that has been suggested by some, that is, not the Complaint *of* Nature, but the Complaint *about* Nature. Alain de Lille, for one, might have reason to complain. Alain, it must be noted, was not particularly well-favored by Nature. He was notoriously petit, even dwarfish. So Nature's repeated descriptions of his excellence must be seen as fantasy, or another clue to the reader on the *qui vive* that Nature is prone to produce misbegotten progeny. Alain's contemporary reputation as *humilius* was confirmed by a 20th-century exhumation.

Thy Rod and Thy Staff, They Comfort Me

The *De Planctu Natura* ends with the goddess calling on her "priest," Genius, to mete out punishment to all who turn from her laws. Nature urges Genius, "[A]bominationis filios a sacramentali Ecclesiae nostrae communione sejungens, cum debita officii solemnitate, severa excommunicationis virga percutias" (According to the solemn duty of your office, you may pierce the sons of abomination with the rigid rod of excommunication, severing them from the sacramental communion of our church). Is this "church" the actual one, or merely the metaphoric one we've seen elsewhere, with its genital "temples" and "shrines"? In this language of the schoolroom do we see a precursor to the essentialist idea of homosexuality, do homosexuals become a class or kind, here? Genius complies with the following sentence:

[A] supernae dilectionis osculo separetur, ingratitudinis exigente merito, a naturae gratia degradetur, a naturalium rerum uniformi concilio segregetur, omnis qui aut legitimum Veneris obliquat incessum [...] Qui autem a regula Veneris exceptionem facit anormalam, Veneris privetur sigillo. (Col. 0482A)

As the condign reward for their ingratitude, let all those who turn away from the legitimate channel of Venus be degraded from Nature's grace, let them be separated from the kiss of heavenly delight, cut off from the uniform assembly of the things of Nature [...] Let whoever makes an abnormal exception to the rule of Venus be deprived of Venus' seal.⁵⁷

This is an example of *contrapassum*, wherein punishment is made to fit the crime. (Dante saw the potential in this idea.) It is not surprising perhaps that the instrument of this chastisement is the *anathematis gladius* (the sword, but also prick, of anathema).⁵⁸ What, exactly, is the effect of this anathema? Nothing. In Genius' formulation it seems that the punishment *is* the crime, for the excommunication only reiterates what is claimed about the sodomite to begin with: that he is outside the course of nature. How can this work as either corrective or discouragement? What should be a most terrible judgment has less impact than the benign injunction offered after confession ("Go, and sin no more"). This anathema (literally, death) has no sting.⁵⁹ Nature may concede the weakness of this response, for she claims, "*Sed quia excedere limitem meae virtutis non valeo, nec meae facultatis est, hujus pestilentiae virus omnifariam extirpare, meae*

⁵⁷ This reference to the rule (or rod) of Venus is strange, considering the blame the Cyprian gets elsewhere. Likewise, Venus' seal, which in the metaphor of the *De Planctu* is the masculine organ, like the hammer, that which imprints on "feminine" matter.

⁵⁸ Earlier, Nature referred to Genius' paraphernalia as "*excommunicationis virga*" (the staff—and prick—of excommunication). Does he carry both sword and staff? Or has he a single implement which can be called by these names? And what else is simultaneously *virga* and *gladius* but the metaphorized phallus?

⁵⁹ I am reminded of Luis Buñuel's *La Phantome de la Liberté*, in which a man on trial for murder is condemned "to die," whereupon he nonchalantly exits the courtroom. Anathema, in the *De Planctu*, is repeatedly called *exterminium* and *exilium*. Sodomy, too, is everywhere equated with exile and banishment; the sodomite is the "outcast."

possibilitatis regulam prosecuta, homines praedictorum vitiorum anfractibus irretitos anathematis cauteriabo charactere” (Since I am not able to exceed the limit of my power, nor have I the know-how to totally eradicate the poison of this pestilence, I will follow the rule of what is allowed and sear with the branding iron of anathema men who are ensnared in the tangle of the said vices). Burgwinkle argues that “Alain adumbrates the Church’s official condemnation of sodomy (1179) in this homophobic text but also recognizes the contingency of such a condemnation.”⁶⁰ Scanlon maintains that the “repression of homoeroticism is itself tinged with homoerotic desire,” that Genius is a “proto-Foucauldian” who teaches that “sexual regulation is itself a species of desire.”⁶¹ However, Scanlon, cannot fully embrace the idea that Alain, himself, is aware of this. As a participant in the Third Lateran Council, Alain must, he argues, have whole-heartedly endorsed its call for the institutional repression of homosexual activity that the Church promulgated in 1179. I am not convinced, and the *De Planctu Naturae* need not be seen as an *anticipation* of the council’s edict, but a response to it and a possible comment on the effectiveness of excommunication.

Is Alain among the excommunicated? Why the imputation of an almost irresistible delight to sodomy? Sometimes it seems that *this* is the most common charge against homosexuality—even today. Its essential threat seems to be its remarkable pleasure, when weighed against the alternative (not celibacy, but heterosexuality). As one medieval writer opined: “*Quelibet ignita Venus est, set maxime ardor est maris Venus est, set maxime ardor est maris in stupro: novit*

⁶⁰ Burgwinkle, p. 192.

⁶¹ Scanlon, p. 242.

*quicunque probavit*⁶² (Venus is made red-hot by anything, but its greatest heat is in the sin of sodomy, as whoever has tried it knows).

Conclusion

Do I intend to “out” Alain? Unlike his material corpse, his emotional core is unavailable for exhumation. In a text so concerned with orthography and the dangers attendant on the *calamus* of Venus, we must confess another peril: erasure. Eradication, remember, is urged on the sinner, in terms that suggest castration at his own hands. I, for one, refuse to be erased from the record only because I have not been written there! My queer project is intended to communicate to the reader the very queer nature of Alain’s own work. And to rescue him from recrimination in the eyes of those who see all churchmen as dogmatic regulators of human affection, without humor or understanding. I don’t see Alain as an imposer of cruel sanctions. Nor is his attitude imposture. I think Alain saw a real flaw in human nature and the *De Planctu Naturae* is meant in some way to expose that blemish (to blame nature) and to show the inadequacy of a limited “natural” response to it. If the fault is in Nature, its correction is not to be sought there. Where, then? Alain provides the answer in the *Anticlaudianus*, which is best seen as a sequel or, rather, response to the *De Planctu*. (Much in the way that Gide saw *La Porte Etroite* as a companion piece to *L’Immoraliste*. The modern author saw the need for an austere analogue of the theme presented in his own story of homosexual excess.) And if ostracism is *De Planctu*’s recommendation for the sexual pariah, the *Anticlaudianus* takes banishment from God as a *donnée* and concludes that

⁶² Ernst Dummler, “Briefe und Verse des neunten Jahrhunderts” in *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für altere Deutsche Geschichtskunde*, Hannover: Hahn 'sehe Buchhandlung (1888) pp. 343–363.

Wisdom is “the one remedy for your exile.” And this wisdom is not natural philosophy, nor Boethius’ Philosophy, but Theosophy, the knowledge of the things of God that Nature in *De Planctu* confesses she is incompetent to comprehend: “[E]jus opus sufficiens, meum deficiens; ejus opus mirabile, meum opus mutabile” (His work is sufficient, mine is deficient; his work is admirable, mine is mutable. Or, Our chain of reason extends too far when it dares to lift our discourse to the ineffable secrets of the godhead). Nature cannot accomplish the completion of the new (or perfected) man. That is achieved only through the mysteries of faith and revealed religion. That is the one *conversion* that is not perversion. Theology and the Logos do not suffer from the misscription of Nature’s pen. Poetry is by its nature ambiguous, and Alain ultimately abandons it. Metaphor is replaced by metaphysics.

The Melancholy of Anatomy

Dissecting Chaucer's Pardoner

The Pardoner's Lap

When introducing the Pardoner in the General Prologue, Chaucer gives us a brief description of his physical appearance. This thumbnail relies on physiognomy to relay much of its information to the reader. According to Walter Clyde Curry,

For Chaucer and for every educated man of his time this physiognomical lore made it possible to judge with a certain degree of accuracy and with appropriate infallibility the inner character of a man from a study of his form and features.¹

Curry proceeds to give an analysis of the various parts of the Pardoner's body. His "glarynge" eyes like a hare's indicate a "glutton, a libertine, and a drunkard." We also learn that yellow hair "indicates an impoverished blood, lack of virility, and effeminacy of mind." The feature that has drawn the most attention from critics is this:

No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.²

Now, the Pardoner's smooth cheek suggests a hormonal deficiency to the modern reader, but it had a moral implication for the medieval mind. One writer baldly claimed that "a man beardless

¹ Walter Clyde Curry, "The Pardoner's Secret" in *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*. Barnes & Noble Press, Inc (New York 1960) p. 57. Whether one believes that Chaucer believed this, he was certainly able to exploit the science to convey information quickly.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (General Prologue 689–91) in *Chaucer*, F. N. Robinson, ed., (Houghton Mifflin, New York). Hereafter, all line citations from this source will be given in the body of the text.

by nature is endowed with a fondness for women and for crafty dealings, inasmuch as he is impotent in performing the works of Venus.”³ And what, exactly, are we to make of the debate between “geldyng” and “mare”?

In his discussion of the Pardoner’s condition, Curry opts for the first term, making a plausible defense for the Pardoner as *eunuchus ex nativitate*. That is, a native, or *born*, eunuch (as opposed to *castratus*). Curry quotes Rasis, an Arab physician (10th century): “A eunuch is always a man of evil habits... He, however, who was not castrated, but was born without (or has very small) testicles and has the appearance of a eunuch (and never has a beard), is worse.” (Curry p. 59.) In Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*, we get a similar description of the (castrated) eunuch, which claims that castration inflicts “the greatest shame and loss upon a man,” and “makes him cowardly, perverse and base.” The French poet also writes that eunuchs “display no trace of hardihood, unless it be in some malicious vice;/ like women they are strong in deviltry,/ and in some other ways resemble them.” (*Roman de la Rose*, § 93, ll. 18–21.) In effect, the authorities saw an outward (physical) sign of an internal (spiritual) blemish. If the Pardoner is a eunuch, of course, his fellow pilgrims cannot know whether the condition is natural or surgical. In the Middle Ages castration was sometimes used as a remedy or punishment for sexual offenses, including homosexuality.⁴

³ Rudolphus Goclenius, *Physiognomica et Chiromantica Specialia* (Quoted in Curry, p. 58). This “fondness for women” is seen even today, when gay men fraternize with female friends, presumably to gossip and grouse.

⁴ See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987) pp 149, 473. Also, John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980) pp. 172–73, 288. Brundage notes “the frequency with which homosexual behavior comes to be associated with heresy” in the Middle Ages. Both authors stress the rarity of the execution of this sentence. Other crimes (miscegenation, bestiality, etc.) could merit the same penalty. Of course, the most famous *castratus* of the Middle Ages is Peter Abelard. He was docked extrajudiciously for an illicit heterosexual relationship.

“Mare,” on the other hand, suggests less a physical attribute—the Pardoner is not a woman, *en travesti*, is he?—than a habitual role (that is, one who is mounted during sex). That would make the Pardoner what we recognize as a *passive* homosexual, today.⁵ Bruce W. Holsinger points out the parallel use of the word in Walter of Chatillon’s Latin satire “*Stulti cum prudentibus*.” There, we are told that “men make women of themselves, and stallions become mares... A new marriage god shamefully joins man to man...”⁶

What is especially interesting in Chaucer’s handling of this passage is his use of signs to indicate the *lack* of something. The Pardoner becomes, as it were, a cipher. What is *revealed* by these signs is *kept hidden* by another sign—the Pardoner’s purse. We are told “His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe, / Bretful of pardoun, comen from rome al hoot.” (GP 686–87) In place of his tool, then, are the instruments of his trade. He tells us himself that, in preparation to preaching,

First I pronounce wheenes that I come,
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente (PP 335–38)

The last word—glossed as “to protect” in *The Riverside Chaucer*—shows that the Pardoner is wary of danger to his body, but it suggests the *validation* of that body, as well. Behind the preacher’s “patente” may lay the Latin *patens* (open, exposed, manifest); as an adjective the Middle English word has this meaning, too. That the Pardoner also “shows his bulls” has an alarming sound. There is altogether too much of the exhibitionist in the Pardoner already!

⁵ In other words, a *bottom*. Of course, the partner (pardoner?) in this position need not be passive in every way. The particularly aggressive are known as “*attack bottoms*”—sounds like our man.

⁶ Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 2001), “Polyphones and Sodomites,” p. 176.

Besides the similarity in sound between “bulls” and “balls,” there is, of course, the dangerously masculine animal of that name. If these indulgences are, in fact, fetched from Rome, we can gauge the extent of the Pardoner’s compensation for what he lacks. In addition to his bulls, the Pardoner also carries false relics in his bag, which is twice (GP 694 and PT 920) referred to as his “male.”⁷ Among them, “my longe cristal stones.” (PP 347) The Pardoner manages to keep quite a store of goods in his bag. In addition to the items already mentioned, there are a cross, veils, mittens, pieces of cloth, and the bones of pigs and sheep. (And these in sufficient quantity to supply a sinful parish.) In this, one might see masculinity, itself, as a false relic or talisman, which is to become fetishized. The part stands for the whole; the symbol, for the absent thing.⁸ The Pardoner sports quite a *package*. (In later centuries, the codpiece would perform the similar function of advertising—and aggrandizing—what it ostensibly, and ostentatiously, concealed.) Of course, covers often draw attention to what they veil.⁹ Chaucer has the Pardoner attempt to hide one thing by displaying another.

If this is the case with the Pardoner's physical deformity, what of his moral depravity? Is his often-stated admission of avarice to be taken at face value? Or is this another mask? Does greed motivate this performance before the Pilgrims? In “Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity in Chaucer’s Host,” Mark Allen suggests that the scene “involves a tension that is as much

⁷ This is a type of bag or pouch, often hung from the waist before the lap. Chaucer exploits the homonym and the visual symbolism.

⁸ The prophylactic nature of the objects must be questioned, as well, since they have not protected the Pardoner, himself.

⁹ Speaking of veils, it should be noted that the Pardoner wears a “vernycle” on his cap. The veronica is a representation of the face of Jesus on a piece of cloth. Seeing the Ellesmere portrait of the Pardoner before reading the *Canterbury Tales*, I didn’t know what to make of the monstrous creature displayed there. Of course, it points up the two-facedness of the Pardoner. (And his presumption—could one choose a *more pious* mask?)

commercial in nature as it is sexual, for the Pardoner's offer of his 'absolucion' and his 'pardoun' is an offer of nothing for something that depends upon a commercial mentality even while it runs directly counter to the commodity basis of any trade."¹⁰ Allen takes the Pardoner on face value—that is, that his motivation is monetary. While the Pardoner's project capsizes capitalist notions of value, I think it has the greater effect of validating—vaunting—his body. It is, as it were, *compensation*.

The Pardoner can't honestly expect the pilgrims to buy his "relics" after he has shown them to be worthless. He is too intelligent for that. He must have some other purpose. Perhaps, he expects to be rewarded for his showmanship. Or, he may be using covetousness as a cover for his true vice, homosexuality (or the 14th-century equivalent). If the Pardoner is a eunuch, it may explain some of his ambivalence. Some church writers insisted that the Kingdom of Heaven is closed to eunuchs. Others maintained that there was biblical warrant for their admission to paradise.¹¹ These views were further complicated by those who interpreted relevant biblical

¹⁰ In *Masculinities in Chaucer*, Peter G. Beidler, editor. D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 1998, p. 19.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 23:1 warns, "Non intrabit eunuchus adtritis vel amputatis testiculis et absciso veretro ecclesiam Domini" (The eunuch—whether with crushed or amputated testicles, or with the privy part cut off) will not enter into the assembly of the Lord). On the other hand, eunuchs seem to receive preferential treatment in Isaiah 56:3–5:

Nor say let the eunuch, 'Lo, I am a tree dried up,'
For thus said Jehovah of the eunuchs, Who do keep My sabbaths, And have
fixed on that
 which I desired, And are keeping hold on My covenant
I have given to them in My house, And within My walls a station and a name,
Better than
 sons and than daughters, A name age-during I give to him That is not
cut off.

And in the Christian gospel, Matthew 19:12 declares:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made

passages to refer to those who were eunuchs *in spirit*, not in the flesh.) If we see the Pardoner in this predicament, we may have greater sympathy for his twisted relation to religion.¹² His question, “What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?” (WP 167) may be a *cri de coeur*. Given the *evidence* of his abnormality, his attempts at camouflage are not effective. His fellow travellers aren’t persuaded that he *isn’t* queer because he is greedy (gluttonous, lecherous). They think he is *all* these. (As the Pardoner, himself, is at pains to show, one sin does not dislocate another; they collocate.) Furthermore, all his sermons on sin reveal his sexual anxiety, as well. Even “*Radix malorum est cupiditas*,” which is his theme (“and evere was”), may hint at the “root” of his vice.¹³

The Pardoner’s Wombe

In the preamble to his tale—which takes the form of a sermon on the sins of gambling, blasphemy, and gluttony—the Pardoner gets particularly overheated about appetite. The *body* language he uses is noteworthy. He tells us that there are many people that

.... been enemys of cristes croys,
Of whiche the ende is deeth, wombe is hir god!

themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.

¹² I know at least one good Catholic boy who experienced a crisis in faith on *discovering* his homosexuality.

¹³ The sexual associations of root vegetables are patent. In the Reeve’s Prologue the speaker gives a colorful description of his lust, which he likens to a leek, with “an hoor heed and a grene tayl.” (RP 3878) The Latin word *cupiditas* conveys more than greed. It is longing, or passionate desire, especially in a sexual sense. It is this sense that its Middle English cognate, *coveitise*, carries in numerous texts. For example, in the *Prose Life of Alexander* (83/21) we read, “Coutise, ȝe say, es godd of þe lyuer [. . .] he hase in his hande a byrnand fyrebrande whare-wit he styrres þe luste of lechery.” This points directly at the words Latin root with “byrnand fyrebrande,” a reference to Cupid’s torch of love. (It is also an apt description of the inflamed prick.)

O wombe! o bely! o stynkyng cod,
Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde! (PT 530–37)¹⁴

Note the two terms of which “bely” is the fulcrum.¹⁵ Synonyms for stomach, the expressions at either end also suggest the organs of generation, which excite especially vehement distaste/disgust in the narrator. The “wombe,” in particular, may daunt the Pardoner. He may fear the work he knows he cannot perform. (Recall that Medieval equation of labor and intercourse—“swynk” means both, for example.) “Cod,” too, is fishy. The word means “a seed pod or capsule; husk, shell, skin,” and a “bag or wallet.” Both notions lend themselves easily to an application for the scrotum. It also came to mean the throat or belly. If the cod-throat is “fulfilled of dong,” then we may have a nauseating image of fellatio as coprophilia. Of course, he may be attracted simultaneously to that which repels him. This may explain the extraordinary energy he marshals in attacking these body parts. It is a way to exert power over that which unmans him. One sees here a sort of “erotics of disgust.” If so, the Pardoner might not be alone in the medieval world. Joan Cadden notes that Gilbertus Anglicus believed that sexual pleasure was providential: it “helps overcome a natural aversion to a disgusting act.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The Pardoner translates the Pauline lament (Philippians 3:19), “quorum deus venter,” where the idolized *venter* entails the same confusion: it is both stomach and womb. Adams (101–2) maintains that “uenter remained in everyday use. It is not surprising to find uenter used of the womb in works of colloquial or vulgar flavour[.]”

¹⁵ In addition to Paul’s letter, these lines may echo Tertullian’s criticism of garrulous women (“To His Wife”): “*Deus enim illis, ut ait apostolus, uenter est, ita et quae uentri propinqua*” (Their god, as the Apostle says, is their belly, and so too what is neighbor to the belly). Joyce E. Salisbury quotes these lines as evidence of anxiety about the “open,” “receptive,” and “passive” body. See “Gendered Sexuality” in the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, p. 87.

¹⁶ See, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy” in *Handbook*, p. 55.

Similar anxieties are expressed a few lines earlier when the stomach is likewise characterized with sexualized language:

Of this matiere, o Paul, wel kanstow trete —
Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,
Shal God destroyen bothe, as Paulus seith.
Allas! a foul thyng is it, by my feith,
To seye this word, and fouler is the dede
Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede
That of his throte he maketh his pryvee.
Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee.

(PT 235–242)¹⁷

It would seem the Pardoner can't stomach genitalia. It is as if lechery (which is not the object of this sermon) can't help but impose itself in the Pardoner's discourse. In this way, this outburst may mirror the project of the Pardoner, on the whole. His admission to avarice (and his demonstration of hypocrisy and luxury) may be masks for his *real* vice.¹⁸ The conflation of these organs with those of the lower intestine is particularly appalling. (But not surprising, if we imagine the rectum as a site of the Pardoner's habitual sexual practices.) This is, perhaps, an appropriate extension of the image of the reversed digestive tract—which, as we see, makes a “pryvee” of the throat. This, by extension, makes excrement of what enters the mouth/throat—whether semen or the male organ, itself.¹⁹ If these are what the Pardoner desires, then we return

¹⁷ Another reference to Paul, here the First Letter to the Corinthians (6:13): “Esca ventri et venter escis Deus autem et hunc et haec destruet corpus autem non fornicationi sed Domino et Dominus corpori” (Meat is for the womb and the womb is for meat, and God will abolish both this and these. For the body is not for fornication but the Lord, and the lord for the body).

¹⁸ The Pardoner's admission that he is a “ful vicious man” (PP 459) may point to his anxiety concerning *wholeness*, both full and foul.

¹⁹ “Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede” suggests the varieties of wine (red and white), but it must also suggest blood and semen (the only palatable humor that is white). Insofar as these conjure images of the communion, the blood and spunk of Christ are implicated. I know that white wine is not used in the Eucharistic mass, and some may object that the image fails to include its other essential component: bread. It is just plausible that this is communicated by “white and rede,” if we understand “wheat and reed.” By the bye, one meaning of *rede*

to an erotics of disgust. Besides evoking images of coprophagy, these images tend to make of the mouth an ass.²⁰ If this is the case, then what issues from the mouth can also be likened to shit. This certainly seems to be the case with the foul vocal/buccal productions of the Reeve and Pardoner.

“The centrality of excrement to the poetic enterprise is assured precisely because of its marginality.” Thus, R. Howard Bloch sees coprophagy and waste as linked to a conception of poetry, an “equation of fiction making and excrement making.” In a discussion of influence and the artist’s anxiety, he describes the poet “whose turd-like compression transforms the project of poetry into a closed circuit between the anus and the mouth and that hints, ultimately, at what it means to ingest and excrete that which has already been ingested and excreted.”²¹ I see a similar psychology at work in *Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (and other works), in which the creative performance is rejected by the author (or his surrogate). There is a simultaneous impulse towards the creative (therefore, sexual) and the destructive, a confusion between that which delights and disgusts.

The Pardoner’s pre-occupation with gluttony may strike some as odd, considering the evangelist’s attitude: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh

reinforces the body-horror of the passage: it is the fourth stomach of a cow. Cf. “He riȝt al þe rede, þe wombe oway he bare, þe noubles he ȝaf to mede” (He set out the innards; the womb he bore away; and the nubles he gave to as gift). Likewise, one sense of whit is stomach-turning in this context: according to MED, it is the white slimy matter of a goose turd, as in this piece of medical advice against jaundice: “Tak agoos tort, oþer agandres[...] & tak awey þe whyte, & gyf hyt at morowe þe syke to drynke, hym vnwetyng.” (From *Ein Mittelenglisches Medizinbuch*, p.214.)

²⁰ We see this as well in the Reeve’s Prologue, with the image of the medlar, or *open-ars*, where the foul fruit was conflated with the Reeve’s mouth.

²¹ R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, p. 53.

out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” (Math 15.11)²² The Pardoner makes the equation of ass with mouth when he declares that “At either ende of thee foul is the soun.” Flatulence (either belching or farting) is meant, but speech is a possible implication, as well. Thus the Pardoner expresses disgust at his own product, at his most cherished tool.

The anger of the Pardoner is also directed at cooks, seen as the agents of gluttony:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
And turnen substaunce into accident,
To fulfile al thy likerous talent!
Out of the harde bones knokke they
The mary, for they caste noght awey
That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote.
Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote
Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
To make hym yet a newer appetit.
But, certes, he that haunteth swiche delices
Is deed, whil that he lyveth in tho vices. (PT 538–48)

Note the particularly sexual language used in describing this activity. Cooks “stampe, and streyne, and grynde” in their efforts to turn “substance into accident.” Robinson brings attention to the religious associations of these lines (they allude to a contemporary controversy concerning the Eucharist), but I can’t help feeling that they also refer to coition, in which male “substance” finds its physical embodiment in the womb, the accident of human flesh is created. And the method by which hard bones are knocked to eject marrow—which will find its way (along with a certain *root*) to the gullet “soft and swoote”—summons images of fellatio (is this the Pardoner’s “newer appetit”?).

Elsewhere in the poem cooks are again denigrated for their facilitation of lechery and their drunkenness. (Chaucer finds a neat conjunction of the two in “likerous,” above.) In the

²² Likewise. Mark 7:15: “There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man.”

Manciple's Prologue, for example, the Cook is unable to fulfill his story-telling obligation on account of drunkenness. The effects of alcohol on a man's ability to perform sexually are well-known.²³

Hastow had fleen al nyght, or artow dronke?
Or hastow with som quene al nyght yswonke,
So that thow mayst nat holden up thyн heed?
This cook, that was ful pale and no thyng reed,
Seyde to oure hoost, so God my soule blesse,
As ther is falle on me swich hevynesse,
Noot I nat why, that me were levere slepe
Than the beste galon wyn in chepe. (MP 17–24)

Brought on by too much indulgence in the night (*swynking* or drinking), the cook is crestfallen. The language used seems to make of the cook a cock.²⁴ (Chaucer exploits the similarity in the sound of these two words. The Host swears by “cokke’s bones,” and one is struck by the flaccidity of this expletive.) Here—the episode takes place not far from a town with the suggestive name Bobbe-Up-and-Doun—he cannot hold up his head, and his coloration (“ful pale and no thyng reed”) is decidedly deflated. The drooping cook would rather roll over and sleep than exert himself (so familiar!). Thus, gluttony defeats lechery and yields to sloth.²⁵ In this

²³ The entire exercise of *The Canterbury Tales* strikes me as sexualized. The Wife of Bath certainly brings attention to this when she offers her “tale.” Even apart from drunkenness, I can imagine performance anxiety getting the best of some of the rout. The inexperienced Squire, for example, sets himself a task he'd have to be Hercules to complete. (And even strong men are weakened by wine, as is made clear by the Pardoner's frequent suggestion that the snorting of drunks sounds something like “Samsoun.” Samson, of course, is an appropriate reference for the Pardoner, his weakness—brought about by cutting off the source of his manly strength—is a type of castration.) The Parson, of course, will have nothing to do with *contes*, and excuses himself from the pilgrim orgy.

²⁴ The cook is elsewhere made a mouth or belly.

²⁵ Both here and in the Parson's Tale, the seven deadly sins are decidedly fluid. One leads to another, or are somehow partnered. For example, the Pardoner, *dampnes* “the fyr of lecherye,/ That is annexed unto glotonye.” (PT 481–82)

instance the cook's incapacity may be likened to the Pardoner's general inability. We are told that he is "al bihynde" (MP 8), that is, riding at the back of the pilgrim route. This posterior placement is the Pardoner's favored position.

The Pardoner's distaste is, however, mitigated. He also delights at his own words. (They have a corresponding effect on his listeners.) It would not be surprising that someone with such a tendency towards disgust might have an overly sensitive tongue. This may be communicated in the Pardoner's *seasoning* of his sermons with learned language: "And in latyn I speke a wordes fewe,/To saffron with my predicacioun." (PP 344–45). (Of course, this also indicates that gluttony—often expressed in a taste for spices and *delices*—can corrupt food meant to nourish the soul.)

The Pardoner's Throat

Allas! the shorte throte, the tendre mouth,
Maketh that est and west and north and south,
In erthe, in eir, in water, men to swynke
To gete a glotoun deyntee mete and drynke! (PT 517–20)

Appetite is figured in the throat and mouth. (Here, the fastidious aspect of gluttony are expressed in the delicate—"shorte," "tendre"—character of the body parts.) The Pardoner's own throat receives some attention in the Canterbury Tales. Like his hands, it is part of his gestural repertoire, his body language:

Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As dooth a dowve sittyng on a berne. (PP 395–97)

The iamge of the peaceful dove is undermined by the concealed aggression in "bekke" The reader's first idea is of the silent nod, the beckoning. However, that is soon replaced with the image of the beak pecking ("bek" and "beken") the people. As we have seen, his skill as a

chorister is emphasized in the tale's prologue. (It is already established in the General Prologue: "Therefore he song murierly and loude." (GP 714. On singing as sexual sign, see below.). At all costs, he must make himself heard: "I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,/ And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle." (PP 330–31)²⁶ Before he begins his speech, the Pardoner is addressed as "bel ami" by the Host, a sneering allusion to his effeminacy. The Host's masculinity is threatened not only by the Pardoner. He points out the weakness or effeminacy of other pilgrims, as well. The character Chaucer is asked, "What man artow?" and the Host suggests that "This were a popet in an arm t' embrace/ For any womman, smal and fair of face." This is a strange maneuver (but not uncommon), in which a mocking tone allows a bully to acknowledge the beauty of another man. The Host, a "semely man," also teases the Clerk with "Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde" when he requests a tale from the professional bachelor. And the Clerk acquiesces, with "I am under youre yerde"! This phrase draws one's attention to the Host's anatomy—his yard is his prick—of whom we were earlier told "of manhod hym lakkede right naught." (GP 756). Later, the Host's phallic function for the entire pilgrim body may be suggested by "Up roos oure Host, and was oure aller cock." (GP 823)

The Pardoner's voice is not just loud, it is abrasive. In the initial description of the Pardoner, Chaucer tells us "A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot." (GP 688)²⁷ If the lengthy Pardoner's

²⁶ Bells play an establishing part in the Pardoner's Tale. We are told that the three profligates have gathered at an ale-house "Longe erst er prime rong of any belle." (PT 662) And their fateful search for Death is began after they hear a bell sound the demise of one of their companions. (Who, as it happens, was slain "fordronke"—a prefiguration of their own end.)

²⁷ Immediately after this line we are told "No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have, etc." A goat-like quality signifies effeminacy (his voice), while the goat-y (goatee?) signifier of masculinity is conspicuously absent. In the *Secreta Secretorum*, we are told "Tho that have the voyce hei, smale and swete, bene neshe and have lytill of manhode, and I-likened to women." (Quoted in Curry, p 58) Castrati, of course, are favored for their singing voices.

Prologue and Tale are performed in this loud, shrill register, we may have another reason for the Host's impatience and annoyance. The Pardoner's song is associated with his (presumed) homosexuality in other ways, as well. In the General Prologue we are told "Ful loude he soong 'Com hider, love, to me!'" with the Summoner—who "bar to hym a stif burdoun." (GP 672–73) In "Polyphones and Sodomites" Bruce W. Holsinger offers an interesting study of the development of Western musical harmony and the "sodomitical corruption of the chant" by the "coupling" (*copulae*) of voices. He suggests that, given the "widespread medieval anxieties about same-sex polyphonic singing, this would indicate to the contemporary audience the sexual proclivities of the performers." Roger Bacon (c. 1267) is quoted as one critic of the "emasculating and eroticizing threats" posed by the musical innovation: "More than anything else this decline of the chant is manifested in those voices, adolescent in their effusiveness and feminine in their dissoluteness, which counterfeit in falsetto the sacred and manly harmony almost everywhere throughout the Church."²⁸ And Alain de Lille saw a violation of *natura* in the superfluity of voices. In detailing a "distinctly medieval homoerotics of polyphonic performance," the author devotes some attention to the Pardoner and the Summoner. Furthermore, John Bowers says the Summoner "embodies the most dangerous performance of an excessive sexuality that [is] wide-ranging in its possibilities, indeterminate in its erotic choices, and available for a broad spectrum of partners."²⁹

²⁸ Holsinger, p. 178.

²⁹ "Queering the Summoner," quoted in Holsinger, p. 180–81.

The throat, naturally, comes in for abuse as an avenue of Gluttony. (The word is, after all, derived from Latin *Gula*, the gullet or throat.)³⁰ And the terms employed are expectedly scatological:

Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede [that, again]
That of his throte be maketh his pryvee,
Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee. (PT 521–28)

This casual conjunction of the throat and privy is, of course, elaborated in the Prioress's Tale. The correspondence suggests, again, that Chaucer is ambivalent (!) about language and its uses. It may mirror in miniature the author's tendency to abort or abandon his narratives (*House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchess*) or to negate them (*Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*). And what image should *we* construct to convey the desire of the artist to “take back” his productions, to re-ingest them once they have issued from him?

The Pardoner's Tongue

The Pardoner admits an aversion to hard work (“I wol nat do no labour with myne handes” PT 444). Granted, he does employ his hands *somewhat* in his profession: “Myne handes and my tongue goon so yerne/ That it is joye to se my bisynesse.” (PT 398–99) This business has a decidedly sexual cast. In the Miller's Tale (ll. 3653–55) “bisynesse” is precisely sex: “And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,/ In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas, / Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng.” The Pardoner, no doubt, is aware of the biblical uses of “business.” In Thessalonians (1:4:11–12) we are enjoined to keep our hands busy: “*Vestrum negotium agatis et operemini*

³⁰ Interestingly, the Middle English word *gulchen* means both “to swallow greedily” and to “spew.” So the confusion between intake and outflux that we see throughout the Pardoner's Tale has a possible cultural/linguistic basis.

manibus vestris sicut präcepimus vobis et ut honeste ambuletis ad eos qui foris sunt et nullius aliquid desideretis" (And put your own business in motion, and work with your own hands, as we did command you, so you may walk honestly to those outside, and feel the lack of nothing). This compensatory aspect of handiwork would be especially appealing to the Pardoner. (Earlier in the same text (1 Thessalonians 4:4-6), Paul uses *negotium* in a homosexual context:

[A]bstineatis vos a fornicatione ut sciat unusquisque vestrum suum vas possidere in sanctificatione et honore non in passione desiderii sicut et gentes quae ignorant Deum ut ne quis supergrediatur neque circumveniat in negotio fratrem suum

Abstain from fornication so you may each know to hold your vessel in holiness and esteem, not in sexual passion like the Gentiles who know not God, and neither transgress nor oppress your brother in such business

The emphatic use of the hands is, of course, stereotypical of the effeminate man. Considering the Pardoner's professed acquisitiveness, it is perhaps surprising that he places so little emphasis on the hands. He does, of course, possess a "mitayn" which is said to multiply grain. That it has that effect for its purchasers is doubtful, but it certainly increases the Pardoner's wealth. We are told that he "gets" silver and gold through his activity (that is, both *gets* and *begets*). This is real *seed money*.

As a preacher, the Pardoner gets his living through the offices of his tongue—speech.

Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
But alderbest he song an offertorie;
For wel he wiste, whan that song was songe,
He moste preche and wel affile his tongue (GP 708–12)

His greatest work is here—he *swynks* with his tongue, which suggests its phallic function for the Pardoner, or his penchant for fellatio or analinctus. The General Prologue tells us he is adept at all manner of vocal performance (lecture, song), but in particular predication. In preparation, we are told, he must *affile* his tongue, that is, *make it smooth* (as if by filing). But files also make

things *sharp*, and the reader must sense the danger here—of tongue as weapon. The Pardoner, himself, recognizes this potential. He sometimes uses his sermons to attack parishioners: “Thanne wol I styngē hym with my tonge smerte/ In prechynge.” (PP 413–14). Note the pernicious quality of his speech (likened here to a wasp or scorpion—whose venom is in the *tail*, not the tongue). He likewise compares himself to a snake: “Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe/ Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe.” (PP 421–22) This sentiment against the forked tongue is expressed by St. Matthew (12.34): “O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things?” And Paul also gives a relevant description of hypocrisy: “Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips, Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” (Romans 3.13–14) Note, also, the vivid image that equates the throat with the tomb; they have a psychic propinquity for the Pardoner, as well. This ophidian metamorphosis, of course, conjures the usual association of serpents with Satan (who, we know, can quote scripture).³¹

More troubling, perhaps, is the sexual innuendo in the passage. The Pardoner’s spit is like ejaculate. The proximity of the word *semen* suggests this interpretation.³² The confusion of spunk with spit also suggests the Pardoner has had both in his mouth. Again, we see the tongue

³¹ The Pardoner’s entire method, whereby a vicious man tells a moral tale, is, of course, problematic. But regardless of the condition of his soul, if he brings about true penitence, his effect is salutary (or salvific). Similarly, the efficacy of the sacraments is not vitiated when administered by vicious priests. In this, then, the Pardoner can be seen as corresponding to the tradition that cast Satan as the *servant* of god (as in *Job*)—or what Goethe later offers as “the Spirit who, wishing Evil, does Good.”

³² I don’t know if this word had been adopted yet into common English usage, but its Latin meaning of seed (animal and vegetable) was certainly available to learned readers. (*Semen* first appears in written English in 1398, in Trevisa’s *Barth. De P.R. XVIII.i*) Perhaps, this salty Latin phrase is one with which the Pardoner peppers his sermon. (There are, in fact, *no foreign phrases* in the tale. So, the Pardoner has misrepresented himself, or we must look harder for them.)

as phallus (and both as weapons). The Pardoner's performance can be seen as a hostile sexual act, an attack on his listeners.

The unwholesomeness of tongues seems to concern the Pardoner. Among his false relics is the shoulder-bone of an ass. (Why not jaw-bone? That would seem more appropriate, given the buccal bias of the narrator and the references to Samson elsewhere in the sermon.) He recommends this as a remedy for certain afflictions of cattle:

If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,
If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle
That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,
Taak water of that welle and wassh his tongue,
And it is hool anon... (PP 353–57)

The washing of the tongue is in keeping with the Pardoner's general sense of the organ as foul, infected. Note, again, the disease delivered by mouth or tail—this time of a worm.³³ (The serpent has been diminished, which may correspond to a phallic deflation, as well.) Note, too, the miraculous property makes the tongue “hool” (whole, hole?), so it is a telling talisman for the Pardoner.³⁴ The network of words in “w”—“washe” (twice), “welle” (twice), and “water”—also bears scrutiny. Wetness is general, but need the liquid be understood as water, *tout court*? “Water” could designate any of the body's effluences: urine, pus, sweat, or amniotic fluid. Should we be surprised that it also meant “semen”?³⁵ Nor is “welle” monosemantic. It is also a

³³ “Dragon” is the primary meaning of Middle English “worm,” but the term embraced a variety of noxious creatures: scorpions, serpents, reptiles, and any number of insects or larvae: weevils, caterpillars, maggots, and intestinal parasites.

³⁴ Again, the collapsing of ass and mouth, evidence of an analingual preoccupation.

³⁵ In the Middle English translation of Chauliac's *Chirurgia Magna*, we read, “þe cause why þat a bone is nouȝt sowded [...] is hardenesse [...] and þe febleness of þe norisshynge [...] nouȝt wantynge þe water of sperme.” The connection of semen with bones—which is also seen in the Pardoner's marvelous specimen—is emphasized by Chauliac in the same place: “for bones hauen alwaye norisshynge of þe sperme.”

pit (like Hell's) and a bodily cavity. These combine well with the metaphorical image of the well as vagina.³⁶ The passage pictures the penis-bone dipped into the vagina-anus-well, whence sperm-water is drawn to douse the tongue. It is a fetching image of felching.

A preoccupation with poison becomes particularly apparent in the Pardoner's Tale. The denouement involves the murderous double-crossing of three rogues, one of whom plans to poison the others. In keeping with the anti-Gluttony vitriol demonstrated already, the Pardoner has the poison delivered in a bottle of booze. Having dispatched the bearer of the tainted wine, one intemperate ruffian proposes:

Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merie,
And afterward we wol his body berie. (PT 883–84)

The *rightness* of the rhyme almost makes the reader forget that the proper sequel of “Let's drink and be merry” is “For tomorrow we die.” These rowdies don't even last that long. They guzzle

³⁶ Or anus, although this is usually figured as sere. Wells do go dry. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer puns on “welle”:

Under a tre, besyde a welle, I say
Cupide, oure lord, his arwes forge and file;
And at his fet his bowe al redy lay;
And Wille, his daughter, tempred al this while
The hevedes in the welle, and with hire wile
She couchede hem, after they shulde serve
Some for to sle, and some to wounde and kerve. (211–17)

Here we see Eros forging and filing his phallic arrows beside a well, where the verb “filen” may propose a few dubious actions: to render a thing materially foul, unclean, or impure; to defile; to rape; or to have sex with. The bow, too, is suggestive: it is a branch or bough (all “reedy”) as penis. A similar verb *fillen* (sometimes spelled *filen*) means to satisfy a desire; to indulge one's lust. Such fulfillment might be accomplished with his hands; *felen* is “to touch or feel.” His daughter is Wille (which is a homonym for “welle”), that is, Lust, tempers the arrow “heads” in the “well.” *Tempren* is to soften; to moisten; and to subdue—all apt for the mitigating effect of the vagina on the hardened cock. Furthermore, she cunningly (“with hire wile”) arrays the arrows (“couchede hem’). But that may be understood as: She sinfully (“with hire wile”) had sex with them (“couchen”= to have intercourse). For Chaucer, then, *welle/wille/wile* constitutes a web of wet, wily, and wicked sexuality.

the brew and die within minutes. Poison and venom are apt images for the Pardoner, seeing as they represent both the danger of what goes into the mouth as well as what come out.

Gluttony is decried at length in the Pardoners Tale, chiefly in its liquid variety. Drunkenness is the most appalling manifestation of this vice to the Pardoner. (Although he demonstrates that he is prone to it, himself. Before telling his tale, the Pardoner insists on stopping at a tavern to lubricate his tongue: “I moot thynke/ Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke.” (IP 328)³⁷ The Pardoner preaches: “Now kepe yow fro the white and fro the rede.” (PT 562) In this formulation, wine becomes sexual.³⁸ The reader will recognize the linking of white and red with the feminine in love poetry. (With the woman’s face and with the female genitalia.)³⁹ We have already seen how Chaucer makes these symbolic of the male sexual organ, as well. So the Pardoners aversion is perhaps more evidence for his horror at the sex act, or anxiety at the anatomy. Liquor is to be avoided as an instrument of sexual license. He finds lechery *in* liquor:

The hooly writ take I to my witnesse
That luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse.
Lo, how that dronken Looth, unkyndely,
Lay by his doghtres two, unwityngly;
So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroughte.
Herodes, whoso wel the stories soghte,
Whan he of wyn was replete at his feeste,
Right at his owene table he yaf his heeste
To sleen the baptist John, ful giltelees. (PT 483–91)

³⁷ The *honesty* of the subsequent performance is, of course, in question. The Pardoners “candor” is one of the most problematic aspects of his character. Is it virtue, or just another device in his bag of tricks? Has he learned that the “lewed” mistake frankness for genuine feeling, and are thus unarmed?

³⁸ The Wife of Bath says, “Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,/ Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.” (WP170–71) Here she is ridiculing the Pardoner—both his dipsomania and suspect claims to womanizing (“Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,/And have a joly wenche in every toun”). Perhaps she perceives this as the Pardoners *beard*, as it were.

³⁹ Recall that the colors of the lily and the rose strive for preeminence in Emelye’s face in the Knight’s Tale, ll. 1035–1040.

The biblical examples the Pardoner offers are interesting. The “unkynd” act of incest is troubling enough, but we also recall the other unnatural acts associated with the story of Lot and Sodom. Are these at the *back* of the Pardoner's mind, as well? Likewise, his adducing of Herod's history is suggestive. There is no biblical warrant for the Pardoner's assertion that Herod was *under the influence* when he ordered the death of John the Baptist. Perhaps, he has hit upon this story for the resonances of the (unspoken) means of execution.⁴⁰ The decapitation of the prophet may be a figure for the Pardoner's own dismemberment. If so, his verdict (“ful giltelees”) on the justice of that sentence, may suggest an unconscious assessment of his own culpability. (That is, the Pardoner may *excuse* himself. This may cast a sympathetic light on the Pardoner, who may have a sense that his condition (whether in his *being* or his *body*, whether substantial or accidental) was outside his control, imposed on him by nature or by fortune.

The Pardoner is particularly wary of the relaxed tongue, so common among drinkers. He admonishes the immoderate, warning:

Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure;
For dronkenesse is verray sepulture
Of mannes wit and his discreciooun.
In whom that drynke hath dominacioun
He kan no conseil kepe, it is no drede. (PT 557–60)

The fear of the loss of the tongue can be seen as a type of castration anxiety. (Hey, the Pardoner has already lost one organ. His phobia is forgivable.) Silence also points up the contrast between the tacit and the explicit in so much of this portrait. That is, what is shown, or said, and what

⁴⁰ I am not suggesting that this psychological approach is available to the Pardoner or his creator. Yet poetry operates through association, and these readings can enlarge our appreciation and understanding of the work. Furthermore, Chaucer is an adept observer of human nature, with a seemingly *psychoanalytic* bent (*avant la lettre*). The poet's application of physiognomy—a scientific diagnosis of human character—is an indication of this inclination.

remains unspoken, even unspeakable. The dangers of loose lips expressed here will be echoed in the Manciple's Tale (where the Crow will lose *his* tongue). The emasculating properties of alcohol are made explicit by the Pardoner in his reference to Samson—"Samsoun" is ever the refrain of the drunkard. (This is meant to be troubling, for Samson, we are told, "drank nevere no wyn." Yet he was unmanned, anyway.)

The alliance of drunkenness and death (drunkenness as sepulchre) is appropriate in this tale, which tells how three rioters leave an early-morning drinking party to search for Death. Death, of course, is wedded to *sex* in the tale, as well. (We are given a circular accounting whereby Drunkenness = Death = Sex = Drunkenness, etc.) In the Old Man's address to his "mother" (the earth), for example, there are strong undertones of Eros in Thanatos:

Ne deeth, alas! ne wol nat han my lyf
Thus walke I, lyk a restelee kaitif,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!
Lo how I vanysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn!" (PT 727-32)

The knocking with his staff is suggestive of intercourse. The inadequacy of the Old Man may be hinted at in the shrivelling of his body. (Note that "bones" are not mentioned here. "Flesh and blood and skin" is a good description of the male member.) "Restelee" may hint at the same. In Middle English a *rest* is a sharebeam. To be *rest-less*, then, is to be without the wherewithal needed to plow this earth. If "moodres gate" is an emblem of the maternal matrix, we entertain the idea of sinful sex: incest. The abhorrence of the Pardoner for the female anatomy may come through here in the tacit equation of the womb with the grave. (Which brings us back to that image of drunkenness as sepulchre.) The path to Death is indicated by an Old Man, who points the way to a large tree. There the rioters do not find what they expect, instead they discover a horde of gold. It is in their attempt to monopolize this that they come to death—through murder.

The indirection whereby the Old Man sends these rascals to Death bears resemblance to the Pardoner's own technique. The thing discovered/uncovered is both the thing sought and *not* that thing.

The Body of the Tale

The body manifests itself in various ways in the tale, itself. As noted above, a corpse ("cors") is the cause of the quest for Death. Besides the corporal manifestations of Gluttony and Lechery already discussed, Chaucer uses the language of the body to characterize other vices, as well. So, gambling is made morbid by equating dice with the long-established image of "bones." Blasphemy, which is, after all, a corruption of the spirit, manages to be given a bodily dimension, too. (When spoken, it is also a means of making the foul inside manifest. It might, therefore, be likened to human waste.) We are told that the villains are much given to cursing and taking oaths:

That it is grisly for to heere hem swere.
Oure blissed lordes body they totere, —
Hem thoughte that jewes rente hym noght ynough; (PT 473–75)

To my ear, "grisly" sounds awfully like "Christly," which makes the line problematic, if not blasphemous. This language is repeated—and the connection more clear—at lines 708–09: "And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn,/ And cristes blessed body al torente." The dismembering language of their swearing is given ample demonstration:

By goddes precious herte, and by his nayles,
And by the blood of crist that is in hayles,
Sevene is my chaunce, and thyn is cynk and treye!
By goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye (PT 651–54)

Also “ye, goddes armes!” “goddes digne bones!” “Ey! goddes precious dignitee!” and “By god, and by the hooly sacrament!” (PT 692, 695, 757, 782) The Pardoner takes evident glee in manufacturing these fracturing oaths. And he manages to blaspheme *while* preaching against it: “Now, for the love of crist, that for us dyde,/ Lete youre othes, bothe grete and smale.” (PT 658–59) The reader should bear in mind the frequent Pauline construction of the Church as the body of Christ: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (I Cor. 12.12, also 14 and 27), and “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Rom. 12.5), and “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Eph. 4:30). Blasphemy—the mutilation of the body of Christ—sets one apart from the members of his church.

There is even a sort of *identity* between the massacred Christ and the emasculated Pardoner, either in the author’s mind or his character’s—remember that vernicle. This, in itself, may be blasphemous. This sort of perverse identification is seen elsewhere in “The Pardoners Tale.” When the two crooks contemplate killing their comrade, one suggests, “I shal ryve hym thurgh the sydes tweye,” making this fellow a type of Christ, who died between two thieves, his sides pierced.⁴¹ (The incidents surrounding the crucifixion are also suggested by the activity of the thieves: their gambling, in general, and that they cast lots to see who will go into town.) In fact, these three can be seen as a symbol of the Trinity, which is torn apart through their viciousness. (Chaucer seems to be amusing himself with the numbers one, two, and three at the end of the tale.) Thus the rending of the body of Christ (which is figured as blasphemy in the sermon) is enacted in by these men in the larger story, as well.

⁴¹ The violence may be read as sexual violation, as well—the penetration of one felon by the other.

The Pardoner's Lips

Having brought his three victims to death, the Pardoner ends his recitation with an invitation to purchase his merchandise. He singles out the Host:

For he is moost enveloped in synne.
Com forth, sire hoost, and offre first anon,
And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon,
Ye, for a grote! unbokele anon thy purs. (PT 941–45)

The Pardoner indicts the Host as “moost enveloped in synne,” that is, involved in sin, whose nature—*voluptas*—may also be enveloped in the word. (“First” suggests the same; as a noun, the word means “strong desire,” i.e. thirst.) This is an indecent proposal, considering where on his body the Pardoner carries the relics. Doubly so, for the Host would have to assume a compromising position: “Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun.” (PT 925) The invitation to “unbokele thy purs” is also leading, for there is a conventional conflation of purse and pudendum.⁴² This may be equivalent to the Pardoner’s saying “Whip it out.”

The association of the purse with the scrotum and male genitalia is also made in the description of the Summoner, the Pardoner’s partner in diversion. We read:

Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle.

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
He wolde techen him to have noon awe
In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
For in his purs he sholde ypunyssh be. (GP 652–57)

This may suggest that the Summoner is given to masturbation, and that (when solitary pleasure pales) he initiates others in the practice. This is a dangerous defense of vice; it permits the body

⁴² Insofar as *grotes* are pellets of excrement, the Pardoner signals the value of his relics, or the reward for kissing them. In any case, it establishes the association of relics and turds that the Host also makes.

all license, as it is separate from the soul. Of course, it also scorns payment for absolution—pence as penance.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, this incites the hyper-masculine Host—is *he* compensating?—to a vehement verbal attack on the Pardoner:

Lat be, quod he, it shal nat be, so theech!
Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
Though it were with thy fundement depeint!

The Host's response picks up on the poem's peculiar preoccupation—the propinquity of ass and mouth and genitals.⁴⁴ (*Breech* is not only britches but also asscrack). Is his vehement protest an unconscious expression of his sexuality? To what extent does he desire the Pardoner? Is he, too, repelled by that to which he is attracted?

Besides raising questions about the genuineness of the relics they will see at Canterbury (the breeches of St. Thomas were among them), the Host's hostility brings attention to the Pardoner's unholy character. He is not saint, but Satan. For, surely, the *osculum infame* is alluded to here. This “shameful kiss” was one of the principal rituals of devil worship. Those swearing allegiance to the Fiend were believed to have to kiss his anus—or that of a surrogate. Devil-worship is mentioned in the Pardoner's Tale, under the character of gluttony (the tavern is his tabernacle):

Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrifice
Withinne that develes temple, in cursed wise,
By superflytee abhomynable. (PT 469–71)

⁴³ That man's soul is in the purse/scrotum may have been supported by medieval models of reproduction, which supposed that the animating principle was contained in the male semen. (Yes, a *female* semen was postulated, as well.)

⁴⁴ Besides his mouth, the Host brings his nose and eyes into the imagined action. “Depeint” figures the asshole as ornamented with shit, while “seint” suggests its scent.

There, the devil's temple may be read as his rectum, and the abominable superfluity may be either the semen they sacrifice—deposit—there, or the watery waste they suck thence, in “cursed wise.” (*Wise* may hint at more than the manner of the satanic service—cursedly It is the stalk of a plant, which suggests the means of sacrifice. As a variant of *vis*, the word designates a screw. As an alternative form of *vice*, it is ritual uncleanness. The Pardoner's tale, and its criticism of the so-called “tavern vices” may be seen as an attack on the Host's livelihood. So, the Host may be responding to a combined threat—to his income *and* his sexuality. (We have already seen how the purse is tied to the penis.) In “Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity in Chaucer's Host,” Mark Allen suggests the economic dimension of sexuality in the *Canterbury Tales*. Allen sees class distinction and competition as motivating forces in the action of the poem. In this light, then, we can read the Host's anxiety when faced by the Pardoner's ability to generate wealth out of nothing. According to Allen, the tension between host and Pardoner “can be seen as a microcosm of an opposition between productive commerce and the vacuity of the Pardoner's ventures. At the same time it places virility—or obsession with virility—in opposition to sterility.”⁴⁵

The Host also suggests that the Pardoner is given to swearing false oaths—more blasphemy. However, in castigating the Pardoner and denouncing his dubious goods, the Host, himself swears by a relic of suspect provenance:

But, by the croys which that seint eleyne fond,
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or os seintuarie.
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (PT 947–48)

⁴⁵ Allen, p. 19.

Here the Host makes explicit the correspondence between the contents of the Pardoner's wallet and his *cojones*. (The term “os seintuarie” subtly emphasizes this: *os/osse* is Middle English for the scrotum.⁴⁶) This suggests that it is not only the false-seeming piety of the pardoner that disturbs the Host, but his effeminacy, as well. Chaucer has an eminent precursor in his conflation of relics with testicles. In the *Roman de la Rose*, the Lover upbraids Reason for her indecorous speech after she refers to the castration of Saturn. She defends herself:

Fair friend, without disgrace I may well name
Quite openly and by proper term
A thing that's nothing if it be not good.
Even of evil may I plainly speak;
Unless it tend to sin, I'm not ashamed. (*RR* § 33, ll. 33–38)⁴⁷

After drawing a lesson from Plato's *Timaeus*, she continues:

You make objection that I use a word
Which you call lewd. I ask you, before God,
If when I gave the names to all the things
I'd relics “cullions,” cullions “relics” called,
Would you who now so snap and bite at me,
Have said that “relic” is a filthy word?
Cullion is a good word; I like the name—
Genitals and testicles as well (*RR* § 33, ll.148–155)

This scene in the French romance is especially interesting, for it deals at some length with the problem of correspondences that color Chaucer's treatment of the Pardoner. Lady Reason

⁴⁶ As it does in a medieval English anatomy, comparing the female genitalia to the male: “Pe self matrice is as þe Osse, or bursa testiculorum, þat is to seie, þe balloke cod of a man.” (Cited in *MED*.)

⁴⁷ Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, (Harry W. Robbins, translator) Penguin Books, New York 1962. p.143. Chaucer was familiar with the *Roman*, having produced a translation of part of it, himself. Stephen A. Barney notes the influence of the French poem, as well: “Chaucer may have thought to associate relics with genitalia because of some usages in the *Romance of the Rose*. There *coilles* or “coillons” are associated with *reliques* and the word *bourses* (wallets) is given as a euphemism for genitalia.” See “An Evaluation of the Pardoner's Tale” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Pardoner's Tale* (Dewey R. Faulkner, editor). Prentice-Hall, Inc. (Englewood Cliffs 1973) p. 94.

stresses that signs are arbitrary, that the word is not, in fact, cousin to the thing. Her lecture also includes an admonition to bridle speech.⁴⁸ (Perhaps, she is the Manciple's "dame.") As it happens, the Host's entire tirade leaves the Pardoner speechless: "So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye." (PT 957) The Host's attack, which threatens to castrate the Pardoner, effectively does that: it deprives him of his *tongue*.

Considering Chaucer's tendency to revoke speech, one might imagine that the tale would end with a silent Pardoner. Instead, the author offers a scene of reconciliation. The Knight intervenes:

Sire pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
And ye, sire hoost, that been to me so deere,
I prey yow that ye kisse the pardoner.
And pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.
Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye. (PT 963–68)

The Knight enjoins the Pardoner to be merry "of cheere," that is, to show joy in his face. I imagine Chaucer wants the reader to hear French *chair*, flesh, in an invitation to carnal delight. (That we should entertain bilingual readings is borne out by the pun on *cher*—expensive or dear—in the next line: "And ye, sire hoost, that been to me so deere.") The Knight might be mocking the Host when he advises *approchemente* with "drawe thee neer," for the verb's principle meanings are "to pull or tug at" and "to withdraw [a body part]." Secondary senses include to unsheathe a sword or draw a weapon and to drain or draw off fluid from the body. (Which fluid is suggested by "*neer*;" *nere* is the kidney or the loins. As seat of sexual passion, these can be understood as genitalia.) The Knight seems an appropriate go-between. He may be sympathetic to the Pardoner. He is a sort of alter-ego—his preoccupation, we know, is the female

⁴⁸ It may be worthwhile to point out another parallel to the *Roman de la Rose*. In the French poem the hypocrite False Seeming (a well-recognized model for the Pardoner) eventually subdues Gossip by cutting out that figure's tongue (and then slitting his throat).

genitalia, which he approaches with quaint indirection. He may be engaging in circumlocution here. This *osculum pacis* has taken on a decidedly sexual tone. The Pardoner's desired kiss must be especially satisfying. (And the Host's, too.)⁴⁹

In approaching the Pardoner in this fragmentary way—by riving his body—I may be guilty of a sort of blasphemy against Chaucer. Not in my interpretation of the Pardoner's character or motivation, but in attending to *parts*, instead of the whole. One sometimes gets the feeling that the analysis of a single character or tale is inadequate, insufficient. Each must be considered in relation to the whole, or we risk failing to understand. The very fluidity with which the body of the Pardoner is presented (like the confusion of the vices) is a model for the poem altogether. Elements from one tale find themselves in another, as if torn from their proper place. Rather than seeing this as a *disintegrating* poem, however, I think we can judge this as a method by which Chaucer lends unity, even integrity, to the whole. By creating theses ligaments Chaucer makes it easier (essential) to hold the entire organism together in the memory.

⁴⁹ This may be a truly *miraculous* occurrence. Getting a closeted man to genuflect to one's genitals is easier than obtaining a kiss from him. The Pardoner having been deprived of his tongue, we can assume this is not a French kiss.

Cruising Through Criticism

Cruising is the practice of looking at—and for—partners, allies, or community. It is a semiotic exercise. It is an act of reading, interpreting, and interpellating; one that remains hidden in plain sight. The cruiser "reads" those around him; each cruise is an interpretive act. As Barthes notes in "Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes": "Cruising is the voyage of desire. The body is in a state of alert, on the lookout for its own desire." The reciprocity that Barthes suggests (wherein the subject sees its own desire, in the form of another subject desiring him) depends on the cruiser's ability to interpret those persons or situations he is looking at. Although cruising always entails recognition, I would like to propose that it is not always about sex. The desiring subject, moving through the world, whether cruising or not, looks for and meets the gaze of those who recognize him, who recognize and validate his desire, or simply, his identity. In those gazes, a community is built and recognized, all the more potent for its secrecy, its ability to produce itself in the middle of many gazes, while escaping the gaze of many.

James Creech is another critic-cum-cruiser. He explores the "encrypted erotics" of Melville's *Pierre*—the author's subtle expression of a closeted desire and the sensitive reception of the text by homosexual readers. There is, he says, a sort of "wink" of complicity that the novel directs at a knowing audience. Discussing this notion of address, Creech writes:

Because it emerges out of taboo and secrecy, it forms another kind of communication. Rather than transmitting information from one who knows it to one who doesn't, the wink enacts a communion of those already presumed at least preconsciously to know the taboo secret. The confident hope for that communion, that sharing, is what a wink is.¹

¹ Chapter Four, "Textual Cruising" in *Close Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1993) pp. 93–94.

There is something almost mystical in this exchange. Creech's emphasis is less on communication than on communion. This *transmissio* of knowledge, is also an *emissio*, a projection, and a *promissio*, a promise—of union. It is the unspeaking hope for an unspoken love. The confident author addresses and desires an ideal reader—who may not, may never, exist.² (Even Creech's word “confident” hints at a metaphysical dimension of this aspiration: Melville's wish is for a *confident*, a man to share his secret³ with, but also a coreligionist who shares his faith in the possibility of erotic communion.

Roland Barthes also analogizes criticism, or reading generally, to cruising. Both offer a “polyphony of pleasures,” where text and readers, like tricks and johns, are an “amorous plural.” And this entails a degree of two-timing, of constant inconstancy:

[I]t involves an implicit theory of irregular discontinuity which can be said to be simultaneously aesthetic, psychological, and metaphysical; plural passion, as a matter of fact—once its excellence has been acknowledged—necessitates leaping from one object to another, as chance presents them, without experiencing the slightest sentiment of guilt with regard to the disorder such a procedure involves.⁴

I am such a guiltless reader, I do not confess my sins against the text, but profess them. The poem, the verses, the words entice me in turn. My joy in flirting with meanings is not so much unfaithfulness as polyamory. Like Barthes, I pursue a plural passion.⁵ Yet I never deny the logos;

² Creech (94) admits that this “textual cruising” will not always score, that “some readers might not see the wink or share in the secret awareness that it both constitutes and acknowledges. If they do not, the text may do nothing to inform them.”

³ Creech observes that the subtext not only signals what is occluded but “even protects the secret by not speaking or revealing what is hidden. It just acknowledges that sender and receiver of the wink share in an awareness of something about which one does not speak.” The closet is not only a prison but a preserve.

⁴ Roland Barthes, “One Always Fails to Speak of What One Loves,” in *The Rustle of Language*, translation by Richard Howard, University of California Press, Berkeley (1989) p. 298.

⁵ Curiously, Barthes’ constant refrain is “mais tout de même...” (all the same...). The *philosophe dans le pissoir*—who flirts and flits from one man/text to the next, delighting in difference and

I am no infidel, apostate, or heretic critic. I am agnostic. Agnostic, for in reading I admit—no, avow—no determined, definitive, or finite knowledge. I lose myself to find pleasure—in the semiotic cloud of unknowing.

In Barthes' *Le Plaisir du texte*, the theorist suggests that writing, alone, is insufficient for pleasure, that the “*dialectique du désir*” needs a “space” of “possibility,” and “unpredictability,” a cruising ground, *une drague*: “Does writing in pleasure guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must “cruise” him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created.”⁶ Barthes exhibits a gambler's predilection for potentiality and uncertainty. In this “*imprévision de la jouissance*” there is provision for play. Barthes bets that “*les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu'il y ait un jeu*” (Not all bets are off; the game is still on). What cards, dice, or roulette wheel are to the *joueur*, the ambiguous text is to the queer reader. One enjoys the exquisite moment when the spotted cubes are cast, when the card is still face-down, when the ball is making the round, when all is possible; nothing is known; when any outcome can be imagined, and everything is infinite. The reader who wavers or weaves between meanings is similarly poised in semantic space, he juggles the indefinite, the uncertain, and the nonsensical. All sense exists *in potesse*. The *jouissance* is not in winning, nor in decoding, nor in ejaculation—that is, in the denouement, the come-down—but in the space of doubt or hope, where various outcomes are entertained simultaneously, or in the time of uncertainty and possibility, when multiple meanings are played with all together. *Jouissance* is not in *ejaculatio* but *jactatio* and *conjectio*, the tossing of the jacks and the glossing of texts.

the delay and deferral of *différance*, discriminating and *distingué*—exhibits a verbal tic, a suspiration that is *soupir* and *soupçon*, a sigh that suspects an inevitable similitude or intrinsic sameness.

⁶ *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang (1975) p. 4.

This, That, and the Other

The queer reader is one who is able or willing to recognize the unusual, irregular. She values the eccentric. He can comfortably accommodate the oddball; his own oddities conform to the desires expressed in the peculiar. They find their reflections in opaque texts, or respond to an absence of representation as if confronted with an object of interest or inquiry. One is not only constructed in relation to an other—identity formed in the face of alterity—but also in relation to nothing—identity formed confronting a faceless nihility.

If *this*—which I am—is not *that*, cannot be that other—heterosexual—or my being is nullified or negated, what am I? Insofar as my being is denied—from the annihilating “There is no such thing as homosexuality” to the refusal of “It will pass”—I know myself to be. This “*cogito esse*” is a direct response to the nonsense of *non est* or *non sit*. I am, because I am denied. *Sum quod absumptum sum*. The argument that demands *nihil ex nihilo* (nothing comes from nothing) may be adapted as *nihil nisi ex nihilo*: Nothing [is], if not from nothing. Being *is* out of nothingness and negation. In sum, and in *sum*, knowing comes from nothing.

In *Art Poétique*’s “Traité de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-même” (1907), Paul Claudel postulated a similar idea: “*Nous ne naissons pas seuls. Naître, pour tout, c'est co-naître. Toute naissance est une connaissance*”⁷ (We are not born alone. To be born, for everyone, is to be born together. Every birth is a knowledge). Here the punning Claudel creates a connection between coming to be—coming into being—and coming to know—coming into knowledge.⁸ Every

⁷ In *Oeuvre Poétique*, Paris: Gallimard (1967) p. 149.

⁸ One aspect of this knowledge is self-knowledge, a knowledge of what one is by virtue of being: a sense of essence. Claudel is not alone in basing his philosophy on philology; Plato played on words, as well. More recently, Lacan developed an idea of knowledge based on *connaissance* and *méconnaissance* (recognition and misrecognition), where the punning second term indicates the illusory self-knowledge that constitutes the ego: *me-connaissance*.

recognition is a reconnection, a re-cognition, imputing (or imposing) an etymological relationship between words and, thereby, a semantic, metaphorical, poetic filiation between their referents.

Recommending Claudel to his students, Gilles Deleuze connects Claudel's "being-born-with" with Husserl's concept of being-in-the-world, whose origin is "rife with medieval notions, scholastic notions, in which already the theme of co-nativity—which appeared with Aristotelianism—is fundamental in this regard,"⁹ expanding in this way:

To be born is to be born into the world, that is, it is being-born-with, and being-born-with is to know [to acquire knowledge, to come into knowing]. That's it, the fundamental point of nature-soul; man-world; thing-idea conformity. Every birth is a double birth, each double birth is a twinning-into-knowledge. How and why? Because it is to become a fellow man [also a likeness; a double; a doppelgänger]. In this text here—pure Claudel—he sums up perfectly the theme of Aristotle and of Aquinas: "Every sensation is a genesis. Every genesis is a gnosis. The living being knows its double in being-born-with the same [or in the same way]. I am born like the things that people the earth, like the other living beings who populate the world. The moment I am born, I am born-with; being born-with, I know my fellow man." That is the similarity between things and me [That is what I share with things; that is how things are akin to me].¹⁰

⁹ "[P]lein de notions du Moyen-âge, de notions scolastiques, et que déjà le thème d'une co-naissance, qui apparaît avec l'aristotélisme, est fondamentale à cet égard." Taken from transcripts of a lecture delivered by Deleuze at the Université de Paris on November 13, 1984. Retrieved from *Le Voix de Gilles Deleuze en Ligne* website (http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=371). Translation my own.

¹⁰ Ibid. "Naître, c'est naître au monde, c'est à dire, c'est co-naître, et co-naître, c'est connaître. C'est ça, le point fondamental de la conformité nature-esprit, homme-monde, chose-concept. Toute naissance est co-naissance. Toute co-naissance est connaissance. Pourquoi et comment? Parce que c'est devenir semblable. C'est devenir semblable. Dans un texte là, pur style Claudel, il résume très bien le thème d'Aristote et le thème de Saint-Thomas: 'Toute sensation est une naissance. Toute naissance est co-naissance. L'être animé connaît le semblable en co-naissant semblable. Je naît semblable aux choses qui peuplent le monde, aux autres vivants qui peuplent le monde. Naissant dès lors je co-naïs, co-naissant, je connais le semblable, ' ce qu'il y a de semblable entre les choses et moi.'" Translation mine.

This similarity is also the basis of similes and metaphors and riddles. There is a relationship between what is conate and what connotes.

In Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (10.71) we encounter this sphinx-like riddle of Eubulus (the answer is “buttocks”):

A. It has no tongue, yet it talks, its name is the same for male or female, steward of its own winds, hairy, or sometimes hairless; saying things unintelligible to them that understand, drawing out one melody after another; one thing it is, yet many, and if one wound it, it is unwounded. Tell me, what is it? Why are you puzzled? B. It's Callistratus! A. No, it's the rump. B. You keep talking drivel. A. No, really; this it is, one and the same, that tongueless thing speaks; it has one name though belonging to many; wounded it is unwounded; it is hairy and hairless. What would you?¹¹

The riddle emphasizes the double nature of the anus—male and female, one and many. And its singularity—in its name, and in itself; it is it is one (*όμώνυμος*, *homonymos*) and the same (*οὗτος γὰρ αὐτός*). We are familiar with the penis as a sort of speechless tongue, here we are given the asshole as tongueless speaker. This, of course, is the characteristic of all riddle-objects. The asshole is said to speak the unintelligible to the intelligent, a practice equating the *πρωκτὸς* with the riddler, himself. Insofar as the riddler gives tongue to the asshole, we witness an act of analinctus. The disgust that this practice is likely excite in some, with their fear of shit on tongue,

¹¹ ἔστι λαλῶν ἄγλωσσος, ὁμώνυμος ἄρρενι θῆλυς, οἰκείων ἀνέμων ταμίας, δασύς, ἄλλοτε λεῖος, ἀξύνετα ξυνετοῖσι λέγων, νόμον ἐκ νόμου ἔλκων ἐν δ' ἔστιν καὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἄν τρώσῃ τις ἄτρωτος. τί ἔστι τοῦτο; τί ἀπορεῖς; β. Καλλίστρατος. α. πρωκτὸς μὲν οὖν οὗτος γε. β. σὺ δὲ ληρεῖς ἔχων. α. οὗτος γὰρ αὐτός ἔστιν ἄγλωττος λάλος, ἐν ὄνομα πολλοῖς, τρωτὸς ἄτρωτος, δασὺς λεῖος. τί βούλει

Loeb pp. 538–39. The citation is from a lost comedy called *Sphingocario*. The word which with which the riddler concludes, *βούλει*, is a form of *βούλομαι*, which is “to will” or “to wish,” and “to prefer or choose.” It also means “to mean.” And “to pretend to be.” In all, the speaker suggests that he surrenders to the will of the auditor, who must choose the meaning she prefers, while maintaining that this may only be pretence, a pose to save dignity. Enlarging on these meanings, we can suggest that the riddler poet understands that *meaning*, itself, is a pretence; it is subject to the will and desire of the reader.

is the same evoked by foul speech. It is as if in saying “shit” one can taste it in the mouth. This *proktos lalon*, or speaking asshole, is mentioned by Curtius as a motif in medieval comedy. He gives as one example this phrase from Matthew of Vendome: “*In pateris patinisque studet, ructante tumultu / Et stridente tuba ventris, utrinque tonat*” (He applies himself to stewpots and soup-pans, belching from the bowels, his stomach a shrill trumpet, at either end he thunders).¹²

¹² The offensive object of this poem is the rhetor Davus, monstrous in appetite and libido. Matthew associates the two vices. Describing the vessels of interest as “*pateris patinisque*” allows for a repetition of the evocative infix-*pat*, with its associations to *pateo* (to lie open wide) and *patior* (to be buttfucked). The *patina* and *patera* and the *patella* and the religious *patena* (whence our *patina*, *paella*, and *paten*) are, in fact, all derived from the first. This sense of openness may extend to the pathic’s ass—as consequence of sodomy, the looser anus less able to contain its contents.

We also encounter Davus in *De Planctu Natura* (9.21–30):

Nonne per antifrasim miracula multa Cupido
Efficiens, hominum proheat omne genus?
Cum sint opposita monachus mechator eidem
Hec duo subiecto cogit inesse simul.
[...]
Thersites Paridem forma mendicat, Adonim
Dauus. Et in Dauum totus Adonis abit.

Doesn’t Eros perform many miracles by antiphrasis,
So every man is a Proteus?
Although “monk” and “adulterer” are opposites,
Eros forces them into one subject together.
[...]
Thersites solicits Paris’ hot body; Davus, Adonis’.
And Adonis disappears into Davus entirely.

What Thersites asks Paris for is his *forma*. The word incorporates various senses. Principally, it is the body’s beauty or shape (hence, the body itself). It is also a phantasm, an apparition; the poet here hints that one’s appearance is ephemeral. A *forma* (from *formus*, hot) is also a *fornix*, an oven. This is an apt application for the asshole, the receptacle of the *panis-penis*. As “canal” or “aqueduct,” the word again proposes “asshole,” while as “conduit” or “pipe” Alanus’ *forma* may indicate Thersites’ interest in Paris’ penis. In Alanus’ rhetorical context, *forma* must point to the “grammatical form or quality of a word,” which leads us to inspect the word more thoroughly. It is an ablative, indicating the indirect object of the sentence. The ablative case can be used with certain verbs to indicate the object of exchange. Thersites asks *for* the *forma*; what does Paris get in return? If we read it as an ablative of means, we understand that Thersites importunes *with* the *forma*, which makes sense if *forma* has its occasional meaning of “coins”:

Davus, the avatar of loathsome rhetoric, is here made an offensive instrument at both ends of his gastric canal, which equates ass with mouth, as it does their excreta: words are burps, farts, shit.

When prompting his audience to a solution, Eubulus's riddler supposes aporia: "Τί ἀπορεῖς?" that is, "Are you at an impasse?" or "Are you at a loss?" The Greek word carries both these meanings: impenetrability, impassibility; lack, impoverishment. Perplexity is the lack or loss of meaning. Simultaneously, it is the failure to arrive at, or push through to, an answer. This semiotic emasculation is manifest in the auditor, who cannot penetrate the secret, who cannot pierce this anus.¹³ That aporia may figure, or threaten sexual failure lurks within the word itself. Απορρέω means "to gush out," "to pour away," from ἀπό (way) and ρέω (flow), the last is the same element whence we get gonorrhea. The word entails "dropping off," "to fall unripe," "decline," "decay," and "going to waste." The one who comes up short in solving the question has "run out" of answers, has shot his intellectual load. I suggest that a Greek reader also contemplated loss, or lack, of precious bodily fluid (Cassandra says of her losing blood, "ἀπορρυέντων," in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, line 1294). The Latin reader surely made the

Thersites seeks to buy the boy. Alanus links economic degradation to the general cosmic decadence.

As for Davus, Alanus employs the character—a byword for gluttony—as a symbol of the sodomite; his asshole is as voracious and capacious as his throat. Adonis (Like Ganymede, an avatar of homosexuality) loses himself in Davus; *abire* is "to transform" and "to penetrate" and "to dissolve" and "to die." *Priapeia* LXXVII has Priapus lament, "*Poenas do quoque, quod satis, superque est, In semenque abeo*" (Enough, my pains are more than enough, I am going to seed") where the guardian god is made redundant by a fence; and phallic uselessness is figured as seminal emission without an outlet—or inlet.

¹³ The fault is in speaker B, not in the riddle. It is not ἀπόρος, without passage, impassible. Since the riddle object is the anus, it *is* a passage; that is its function. The anus is one πόρος—passageway, pore—of the body (πόρος is used of the womb, the esophagus, and the urinary duct in various authors). When not porous, when not serving as duct or conduit, the anus is useless. ("Useless" is another meaning of ἀπόρος.) The anus-riddle means to be a means of achieving or discovering (other definitions of the word) understanding.

connection. Latin *aporia* is a discharge of pus or diseased blood. According to *DuCange*, “*Graecum nomen est. Est autem fluxio, vel dirivatio, vel feces, vel reliquae sordes elementorum, quae in aere purgantur*” (It is a Greek word. It is the flux, or discharge, or feces, or the remnants of filthy substances, which must be purged outside the body). *DuCange* expands; it is an ulcer which seeps pus or diseased matter, “*vulnus, stimulus, abhominatio.*”

Insofar as the interlocutor experiences the *aporia* Eubolos anticipates (τί ἀπορεῖς), he is unlike the asshole, here. The word means impassible and—even worse—without a passage. Ἀπόρος is without a pathway, and—since πόρος can mean rectum—without an asshole. *Aporia* as rhetorical puzzle or philosophical impasse is also pertinent here. This doubt, this indecision or pendulation about meaning or interpretation is precisely what the longer texts prompt, too, with *inversio*, *allegoria*, and *figura*. The word may refer simply to a “riddle;” but in philosophy the *aporia* become a method of interrogation, presenting the pros and cons of an hypothesis, to be resolved in a *solutio*, an understanding that mediates the two. I use it in a more rhetorical sense, indicating the semantic standstill that must be overcome when presented with a pun or other wordplay or verbal ambiguity which activates multiple meanings. In a riddle the *solutio* is demanded, but even here the mental entertainment of two-in-one-ness is part of the pleasure. When the flexible reader allows both meanings to pass simultaneously through the heretofore closed passage, he permits a semantic double penetration. The rhetorical pleasure is akin to the physical; the stretching of one’s logical or linguistic capacities mirrors the exertions of the super-tagged asshole.

Riddle objects are a paradox: speaking things without tongues. Eubulus makes this explicit. Unspeaking and, in those cases where no answer (or only one of two) is given, unspoken. This idea, too, impinges on *aporia*, for that which is ἀπόρρητος is “not to be spoken.” This enigmatic

anus is secret, esoteric, ineffable, unfit to be spoken. Derrida once opined on the possibility in aporia's impassibility:

I believe that we would misunderstand it if we tried to hold it to its most literal meaning: an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilisation of thinking, the impossibility of advancing, a barrier blocking the future. On the contrary, it seems to me that the experience of the aporia, such as de Man deciphers it, gives or promises the thinking of the path, provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible.¹⁴

Derrida goes on to say:

In other words, the aporia provokes undecidability, which is the condition of deconstruction. The very oscillation of undecidability goes back and forth and weaves a text; it makes, if this is possible, a path of writing through the aporia. This is impossible, but no one has ever said that deconstruction, as a technique or method, was possible; it thinks only on the level of the impossible and of what is still evoked as unthinkable.

In confronting the enigmata presented by ambiguous authors and enjoying this back and forth, this give and take of the text—the semantic oscillation that is also a sexual swinging—I opt for Derridian undecidability.

Decision may be imperative in the realm of ethics, but in lexis it is decidedly optional. Decipherability does not imply decidability. Language invites cognitive dissonance; it is the means by which two things can occupy the same space simultaneously. And choice or preference or necessity need not dictate a single meaning. The ἀπόρημα (*aporema*) resists ἀφορισμός (*aporismos*), the puzzle defies definition.¹⁵ The reader may continue to entertain multiple,

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (Revised Edition) Translators Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf. Columbia University Press, New York, (1989) p. 132.

¹⁵ The riddle is provocative because the speaking object renders the subject silent. And that silence suggests another. The aporetic invites suspicion of the ἀπόρρητος (*aporrheto*): the dubious object may be unspeakable. The aporrhetic is that which must not be spoken, the secret, forbidden.

sometimes conflicting, interpretations. The aporia is not a blockage, but an opening, or opening up. The aporetic rectum is a paradox: impasse or passport? Does it signify evacuation or invitation, is it a passage in or out? Why, of course, it is both.

The pleasure of the riddle is the disclosure of a secret, both openly declared and encoded. The mystery lies not so much in the apparent koanic impossibility—"What's black and white and red all over?"—as in the deception which obscures or perverts meaning—"What's black and white, and read all over?" In the case of the obscene riddle, the pleasure is also to utter the unspeakable, brazenly, out loud. As with the object itself, the silent, or silenced, is given voice. Prompting an obscene association in the audience is also a sort of seduction. Whether the sexual answer is affirmed or denied, the partners engage in an unspoken understanding, a knowing exchange of the unacknowledged. It is cryptic cruising, generating a pleasurable tension around disclosure or discovery of like-mindedness,¹⁶ a shared shame or appetite.

The queer text is productive, not sterile. It bears—both engenders and supports—multiplicity and mutation. The queer reader is not troubled by a doubling of language, a mirror, perhaps, of his own double consciousness. Each word is its own twin ("We are not born alone..."). Every text, a doppelgänger, a shadow of itself. If the meat of poetry is metaphor, my pleasure in reading is the polyphor,¹⁷ the word that is prolific, productive, bearing many meanings.

¹⁶ An apt word for those who produce riddle, puns, analogies, or metaphors. "Like"-mindedness is a *sine qua non* for linguistic paralleling and imaginative identification.

¹⁷ If the queer mindset allows words their many meanings, it is also prone to create words with new meanings. (Paul's αρσενοκοίτης is such a neologism; apparently he saw a need for a word to describe men who sleep with men. The *dis legomenon* is a melding of ἄρσην, male, and κοῖτος, bed or sex; as it were, mascoition.) My neologism polyphor, analogous to metaphor, is not that which transfers meanings but that which carries many. This is not to be confused with the botanical polyphore, which is a fleshy receptacle that hold many stamens! (I suppress a shudder in writing that word, when what Latin calls for is *stamina*.)

In my explication of the text, it undergoes multiplication. Meanings split off from themselves; semiosis is meiosis. And this operation is reciprocal. The reader may be of two minds about a text. The text splits him, or multiplies him. It both mirrors and shatters him. And yet he remains. Duplicity and complication do not destroy my integrity, obstruct my identity, but instruct, construct, and constitute it. Our model for the queer situation (face to face with the text) is not the split personality, schizophrenia, but polyphreny: that is, many-mindedness, ingenuity, or inventiveness. (I acknowledge that “polyphreny” has a medical application to describe a prepsychotic state.) Barthes believed that readers behaved toward texts in various ways, and sketched a catalogue along psychoanalytic lines:

We can imagine a typology of the pleasures of reading—or of the readers of pleasure; it would not be sociological, for pleasure is not an attribute of either product or production; it could only be psychoanalytic, linking the reading neurosis to the hallucinated form of the text. The fetishist would be matched with the divided-up text, the singling out of quotations, formulae, turns of phrase, with the pleasure of the word. The obsessive would experience the voluptuous release of the letter, of secondary, disconnected languages, of metalanguages (this class would include all the logophiles, linguists, semioticians, philologists: all those for whom language returns).¹⁸

Sense and Tumescence

I think we must resist the impulse to solve or resolve verbal ambiguity. We may, instead, entertain the idea that meaning is not fixed or finite, but exists in a semantic nimbus akin to the atomic cloud. Meanings whirl about each other, and confusion fuels the interpretive project. The word does not (merely) nominate; it nubilates. The role of the critic is not always to rend the veil (*nubes*) of allegory, but to cloud understanding in mists (*nubila*).¹⁹ The critical goal is not to

¹⁸ *The Pleasure of the Text*, p.63. The list goes on. I eschew presenting the remainder, lest I out myself as a Barthean paranoiac or hysteric. I prefer to recognize myself in the catalogue above.

¹⁹ After all, that which is obscured allures. The veiled girl is *nubilis*, in the Latin sense: ready for marriage, and *nubile*, in our sense: sexually attractive. Festus repeats a fragment from Plautus’

disperse the cloud, but to seed it. To introduce new semiotic material to supersaturate²⁰ the clouddtext, whence precipitates a rain of meaning. The result is not a solution, but a suspension—a suspending of solid definition, favoring fluid interpretation.

Or, the semantic unit is like a balloon, which expands as multiple meanings are recognized or entertained. If we try to pinpoint a single sense, the membrane of meaning bursts. What remains, then, is a limp signifier, emptied of the playful air which stretched its linguistic elasticity. In the second model, of course, the desire for unending inflation of meaning contrasts with the pleasure usually associated with sex, where release is the aim and pinnacle of pleasure, and tumescence only a necessary condition, not a good in itself.²¹

Is the figurative language of these texts—the turning of one thing into another, or one word into many meanings—often figured as perversion—to be understood as subversion or diversion? Is the impulse behind this writing to be understood as opposed to, or suspicious of, the norm, the rule, the regular and regulated? We call such opposition “subversion.” In Latin, curiously, opponents are said to be *diversus*. If we think of this sort of text as *diversio*, perhaps we can accommodate the opposing (?) notions of diversion and subversion. Another sense of the word

lost *Dyscolus*: “*Virgo sum, nondum didici nupta verba dicere*” (I’m a virgin, I may not yet speak a woman’s words). Here *nupta verba* are, according to the lexicographer, the obscene language permitted to married women (*nupta* is wife). I imagine the line was said (not necessarily by a female) to signal an equivoque. Curiously, the phrase could also mean “veiled language,” which this apparently was not. On this “nuptialese,” see Festus, p.502.

²⁰ My own language also does this. Within “supersaturation,” I wish to communicate, or cumulate (from Latin, *cumulo*, to overload) these ideas: satiation, fullness, confusion, fruitful (all *satur*); a hodgepodge or stew (*satura*); irrigating or drenching (*saturo*); a sowing or seeding (*satus*); and all prompted by a goatish lasciviousness (*satyr*).

²¹ Perhaps the sexual model for this kind of linguistic play should be “edging,” whereby gratification is pursued through maintenance of erection for an extended time. The organ is engaged or manipulated just short of orgasm, repeatedly. Paradoxically, the delayed, or denied, eruption is said to induce its own paroxysm of pleasure.

relevant to thinking about this topic is hesitation or contradiction, both of which are in play when interpreting metaphor, irony, or pun. Aulus Gellius (6.17.9) notes that words have different meanings for different writers, or even the same writer in various places: *Alio quoque loco Vergilius verbo isto utitur a tua sententia diverse* (In another place Vergil uses the word in a sense opposed to—or different from—yours). Or is it such figuration (merely) a source of amusement or or a preening display of invention and wit? Should we consider its effects? Does the reader enlist in an underground resistance to power, or is he impressed into a superficial titter of recognition?

One exemplar of rhetorical eviration is Clement of Alexandria. He links passive homosexuality with both excess and loss of language:

These women delight in the company of androgynes, and throngs of babbling *kinaidoi* come in, defiled in body, defiled in language, manly only when it comes to delivering their dissolute services, servants of adultery, giggling and whispering and shamelessly snorting through their noses the sounds of debauched sex to provoke immorality; striving to please with wanton word and gestures, summoning everyone to laughter, the precursor of fornication.²²

Clement's *cinaedi* are androgynes who babble licentiously (ἀθυρόγλωσσοι), they are “defiled in tongue” (μιαροὶ δὲ τὰ φθέγματα, tone voice, speech). On the other hand, they whisper and giggle and snort. They delight in “gestures.” (σχήμασι τέρπειν). This verbal reduction, he imagines, is a type of seduction (πειρώμενοι, tempting to sin). Plotinus uses the same language (σχήματα,

²² *Paed.* 3.29.2–3. The translation is by Jeremy F. Hultin, who supplies the Greek original:

ΑἼ δὲ ἀνδρογύνων συνουσίαις ἥδονται, παρειστρέουσι δὲ ἐνδον κιναίδων ὄχλοι ἀθυρόγλωσσοι, μιαροὶ μὲν τὰ σώματα, μιαροὶ δὲ τὰ φθέγματα, εἰς ὑπουργίας ἀκολάστους ἡνδρωμένοι, μοιχείας διάκονοι, κτηλίζοντες καὶ ψιθυρίζοντες καὶ τὸ πορνικὸν ἀνέδην εἰς ἀσέλγειαν διὰ ρίνῶν ἐπιψιφοῦντες ἐπικιναίδισμα, ἀκολάστοις ρήμασι καὶ σχήμασι τέρπειν πειρώμενοι καὶ εἰς γέλωτα ἐκκαλούμενοι πορνείας πρόδρομον.

See *The Ethics of Obscene Speech in Early Christianity and Its Environment*, p. 232 and note.

φθέγματα) to describe the magnetic speech and gestures of gnostic wonder-workers charming their listeners or the gods, themselves.²³ These fellows work their magic on women, beguiling them into depravity. Bawdy laughter and bonhomie is the bad boys' form of sorcery.

Ἀθυρόγλωττος (*athuroglottos*) joins γλῶσσα (*glossa*)—tongue—with ἄθυρος (*athuros*)—without doors—to nominate unbridled speech or impudence. The jocose reader might see the verb ἄθυρω (*athuro*)—to play—in the term and recognize himself among all this tongueplay. Might the expression have a particular application to a sort of prattling peculiar to effeminate men? Such a reading might be generated by an association of ἄθυρσις (sport) with ἄθυρσος (without a thyrsus, or phallus?). A related word, ἄθυρμα, is a toy, pet, or plaything. With this one word, ἄθυρόγλωττος Clement presents a chortling horde of cavorting catamites. Recall that θύρα, door, may euphemize the anus; the unguarded, ungirded tongue may figure a filth-spewing asshole. In keeping with the gendering of certain types of rhetoric, this sentence might mean that they enjoy figurative speech.

These objects of disgust are called μιαροὶ in both voice and body. Μιαρός is stained with blood, befooled, and ritually impure. This may suggest defilement from other bodily fluids, women's menses or the semen of men. (Some idea of fluid is hinted at in the occluded φλέγμα (phlegm) in φθέγματα. (The root φλέγμ appears in words to indicate heat, passion, swelling, *inter alia*.) In referring to the polluted body, the word σώμα refers to the person in toto, but it may also refer euphemistically to a woman's sexual parts, or the faggot facsimile. The ἀνδρογύνων, after all, may be imagined to have a vagina.

²³ See Luc Brisson, "Plotinus and the Magic Rites Practiced by Gnostic Magicians" in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner*, pp. 443–58.

Clement's precursor Aeschines (*Against Timarchus* 1.85) uses σῶμα when describing the lascivious abuse to which Timarchus surrendered his “body,” which ambiguously slips between meaning cock and asshole: τὸν ἄνδρα μὲ καὶ ἄρρενα τὸ σῶμα, γυναικεῖα δὲ ἀμαρτήματα ἡμαρτηκότα (A man with a male body, sinning in female sins). Strong's Bible concordance records that it refers to a "number of men closely united into one society, or family as it were." The degenerates' σώματα (bodies) may also be sin's σώματα (slaves, thralls). Aeschines draws attention to ἀμάρτημα by using two forms of the word in the reduplicative “ἀμαρτήματα ἡμαρτηκότα” (sinning in sins). As a noun it denotes a failure or a fault, a sin. The verb means to go or do wrong (especially of spears that miss their marks). It also conveys a general sense of lack or deprivation.²⁴

Clement's party boys, then, exhibit the classic attributes of the hermaphrodite: excess and absence. Their tongues (like their pricks) are too bold, too unrestrained, too loose. On the other hand their language here is curtailed; their tongues fail to operate properly, until they are lost altogether, leaving only inarticulate noise, like beasts (another way in which they are unmanned).

That the sexually ambiguous should be signalled by their speech is only natural, when even their language can be gendered as hermaphrodite. The word is hermaphroditic, conveying

²⁴ Like Clement, Aeschines was attentive to queer speech. Earlier in the diatribe (1.81) he accuses the public of adopting the cryptic language of Timarchus when referring to lascivious acts like those he committed. He accuses: “εἰ γὰρ μνησθείη τειχῶν ἐπισκευῆς ἢ πύργου, ἢ ὡς ἀπήγετό ποι τις, εὐθὺς ἐβοᾶτε καὶ ἐγελᾶτε, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐλέγετε τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν τῶν ἔργων ὃν σύνιστε αὐτῷ” (For every time he used such words as “walls” or “tower” that needed repairing, or told how so-and-so had been “taken off” somewhere, you immediately laughed and shouted, and yourselves spoke the words that belong to those exploits of which he, to your knowledge, is guilty). This rhetorical appropriation falls somewhere between euphemism and homosexual cant and camp.

uncertain—ambiguous, secret, sexual—meanings or messages.²⁵ Recall how earlier I mused on the dual nature of the *verbum*, its biformity or—in its excess of meaning—its metaformity. If, like Peter Damian’s *blasphemia-sodomia* parallel, I may model a new term on another, we might speak of sexual interpretation, eroticized allegory, or lagnegory. (Or the related pursuits—akin to analogy and philology—of lagnology and philolagny.) Or we might stick with allegory, as long as we understand it as not only speech about ἄλλος (some other thing) but also ἄλλας (penis).

Halperin (347) observes that cultural groups are identified by relation to linguistic communities: “[L]anguage use defines the boundaries of a culture.” No one will argue; I wish to draw attention to the fact that he pinpoints language’s use, not language, itself, as the constitutive element. It is the *mode d’emploi*, not the instrument, itself that matters. This gibus well enough with a medieval conception of the natural uses of language and body, that the abuse of either marks one as other: blasphemer, sodomite; backbiter, cocksucker.

Is there something in the brain, about the language centers of gay men that dictates, or tends toward, certain linguistic styles, attitudes, postures? If so, then gay culture may be an expression of a native reality, a destiny. Rather than cultures shaping human subjects, the individual may dictate which cultural styles are adopted. (Likewise, recent studies suggest a genetic basis for political identification—presumably an entirely social construct.)

Inasmuch as earlier I outlined a criticism as taking up the veil of ambiguity, embracing the cloud (like Faust’s pursuit of the nebulous Helen, perhaps), I also appreciate criticism as display, as dress and undress, both. Exegesis is *ekdysis*,²⁶ wordplay is exhibitionism. In his flashes of wit,

²⁵ Robert Mills envisions a “transgender” hermeneutics: “Another advantage is that transgender transcends some of the other dichotomies, such as homosexuality/heterosexuality, through which sexual desire tends to be articulated in the present: it refers to modes of identification where sexual object choice is not the predominant factor.”

²⁶ *Ekdysis* is not only Mencken’s striptease, but the Cretan festival of Leto. According to myth, Galateia refused to expose her infant daughter (the father had demanded a boy) and raised her as

the writer becomes a metaphorical flasher. His desire to display a tremendous ingenuity indicates sublimation; wit is substitute or surrogate for anatomy. But this display is not (entirely) an assault. If the reader responds receptively, there is pleasure on both sides. One pleasure in word-play (and criticism) is the encounter with resistance and impediment to meaning. As the reader flirts with sense, the text pushes back, denies immediate access to it. This also presents a danger: a failure to come to a conclusion, intellectual impotence. The reader faces the double obstacle—impassibility and impossibility—of *aporia*.

If the *accessus* provides an introduction to a text, I propose thinking of departure or leaving off as not *decessus* but *excessus*. As I abandon this analysis I do not relinquish a position or give place to another. Instead, I conceive of this as a going away that is also a going forward, or a going beyond. If any has followed me this far, he may conclude that my excess is not only a style but a method. In my critical campaign I digress, transgress. To others who would step out into medieval criticism, this is an invitation to overstep. The *excessus* expresses deviation, even aberration, or a liberating dementia.

This state, “*mentis excessus*,” going out of one’s mind, ecstasy, prompted these thoughts in Augustine (*Ennarratio in Psalmos* 34):

In ecstasi non diceret, nisi propinquaret: ecstasis enim mentis excessus est.
Effudit super se animam suam, et propinquavit Deo: et per quamdam nubem
pondusque carnis rursus in terram projectus, recolens ubi fuisset, et videns ubi

a son, Leukippos. When her maturing beauty made the masquerade impossible, the Goddess was implored to effect a sex-exchange. Obligingly, she grafted a penis on the supplicant, who put off her maidenly peplos. As a response to this beneficence, the people of Phaistos worshipped the goddess as Leto Phytia (the Engrafter) and inaugurated the ecdysia (Stripping Festival) to commemorate the disrobing which revealed Leukippos’ manhood. The critical ecdysiast should strip the text to reveal the sex she discovers there. For the myth see *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis: A Translation with Commentary* by Francis Celoria, London: Psychology Press (1992) p. 71.

eset, dixit: Projectus sum a facie oculorum tuorum. Ergo, Sicut proximum, sicut fratrem nostrum, ita complacebam, praestat ut fiat in nobis.²⁷

And he would not have said “in ecstasy” if he had not been near [to god]: ecstasy is an excess of the mind. “And he let his spirit pour out over himself, and he approached God.” Returned to earth as if through some cloud by the weight of his flesh and recollecting where he had been and seeing where he is, he says “I am cast out of your sight. And then, “Like a neighbor, like our brother, so I utterly pleased him, it is best that it be worked thus in us.”

Augustine’s ecstasy, the ecstasy that is nearing God is like the ecstasy that is nearing orgasm.

Coming close, or close to coming, one loses himself in some overpowering (or over pouring) excess, after which one comes down from that high, aware again of the body, and comparing the two states is dejected. Finally, he consoles himself with knowing that he has pleased his partner, which is in its own way pleasing. This ecstasy is also like that experienced by the reader, lost in a cloudtext, approaching some (not *the*) truth, then falling short of that, lamenting “I came so close.” *Excessus* acknowledges, accepts the loss of self before mystery, like Psalm 30:23: “*Ego autem dixi in excessu mentis meae projectus sum a facie oculorum tuorum*” (Yet I said in my mind’s ecstasy, ‘Exposed, I am expelled from your sight’). And I urge the same response to doubt: “*Viriliter agite*,” that is, “Go to it—and manfully.”

²⁷ Augustine Hipponensis, *Opera Omnia*, Fourth Volume, in Migne, *Patrologia Series Latina*, Paris (1841) p. 538.

Appendix

Because allegory proved so productive, the technique survived and then thrived into the Middle Ages. In the *Roman de la Rose*, Raison—ridiculously ignorant of her own status as symbol—closes her famous Timaeian discourse with this bit of lit-crit:

In our schools indeed they say many things in parables that are very beautiful to hear; however, one should not take whatever one hears according to the letter. In my speech there is another sense, at least when I was speaking of testicles, which I wanted to speak of briefly here, than that which you want to give to the word. He who understood the letter would see in the writing the sense which clarifies the obscure fable. The truth hidden within it would be clear if it were explained. You will understand it well if you review the integuments on the poets. There you will see a large part of the secrets of philosophy.¹

It seems that Raison has, indeed, spent some time in the classroom. Her defense is an elaboration of Augustine. . In *Against Julian* (80) he ridicules his opponent' writing

¹ Translated by Charles Dahlberg in *The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean De Meun* (1971) p. 136. The French text (ll. 7123–40) runs:

Si dist l'en bien en noz escoles
Maintes choses par paraboles
Qui moût sont bêles a entendre;
Si ne deit l'en mie tout prendre
A la letre quanque l'en ot.
En ma parole autre sen ot,
Au meins quant de coilles palaie,
Don si briement paler vouliae,
Que celui que tu i veauz mêtre;
E qui bien entendrait la letre,
Le sen verrait en l'escriture
Qui esclarclist la fable ocure;
La vérité dedenz reposte
Serait clere s'ele iert esposte;
Bien l'entendras se bien répètes
Les integumenz aus poètes:
La verras une grant partie
Des secrez de philosophie[.]

that Paul did not name certain parts of the body out of shame or modesty:

Honestas ergo erat non appellare directe, quod Deus facere dignatus est recte; et quod creare non puduerat ipsum judicem, pudebat enuntiare praeconem. Quando istud ita esset, nisi quae ille fecerat honesta condendo, nos fecissemus inhonesta peccando

It follows that it was not possible to mention directly what God saw fit to make correctly, and the herald was ashamed to proclaim what the judge was not ashamed to make. How could this be true, unless by sinning we made unseemly what God by creation made seemly?

Augustine follows this with a lengthy discussion of modesty and the first use of clothing to cover the body. There, language is analogized to clothing, since both can be used to hide truth—as euphemism or as veil. Julian, he infers, errs in thinking that unseemly parts are to be covered, and the even more unseemly to be thoroughly clothed, and that, by extension, language should be obscure or shrouded to the degree that a topic is foul or fouler. Mankind needed no such cloaks (whether diction or costume) when *nudi erant et non confundebantur* (they were naked and unashamed). Furthermore, Augustine suggests that we cover ourselves not because our bodies are shameful or offensive but delectable:

Alia sunt enim quae horrorem ingerunt sensibus, quod deformia sint; alia quae pudorem mentibus, etiam si formosa sint: quia illa offendunt delectationem, commovent autem ista libidinem, vel libidine commoventur.

Some things cause the senses to shudder, because they are ugly; others make our minds blush, because they are beautiful. Those are an offense to pleasure, while these arouse lust, or are aroused by lust.

This directly follows a discussion of Timarchus' writing on the human body, which advanced “*ad illa extrema venisset, qua cibi reliquiae depelluntur*” (until it reached those extremities where the remnants of dinner are forced out). So the pertinent parts are the asshole and the pissshole. Are we to understand that the unnamed *illa* are asses, and *ista* are cocks? That would

mean the buttocks repel men (or at least Augustine), and pricks stir us to lust. There is something strange going on in the language: the things that arouse us are the same things that are aroused. That would indicate that Augustine recognizes that (other?) men get hard when they see a cock (or is it when they see a hard cock?). The excitement seems to be mutual, or general; there are hard cocks on all sides.

These passages may have been in the mind of de Meun. In the euphemistic *cibi reliquiae* (the remnants of dinner), Augustine calls excrement *reliquiae*.² This goes Raison one better. She makes balls holy; he sanctifies shit. An example of how Latin words may convey contrary ideas is the verb *defaeco*. It means both “to shit” (whence our defecate) and also “to cleanse or purify” (the elements *de* + *faex* = “taking the *faex* from,” “removing the dregs from a barrel”). Perhaps confusion is inherent in the concept, since “*Defaeco faeces*” declares “I shit shit” and “I purify poo.”³ Now, the author of these words may have intended a single meaning, but de Meun could have recognized the potential in the juxtaposition and used it in the *Roman*.

That de Meun is influenced by Christian writing on obscenity is patent. But where did he come by this particular conjunction of allegoresis with profane speech? One possible thread might be found in an obscure bit of classical Greek poetic theory preserved in a recently discovered manuscript. Especially noteworthy is the oddly similar nexus around the issue of the

² Augustine often quotes from Timarchus’ own writing, so this expression may originate there. If so, Augustine may want to draw attention to the phrase (he repeats). Did Augustine come up with the ridiculous image, or is he mocking Timarchus?

³ A verb *faeco* is described as *hypothétique* in Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*. A similar word was sometimes used: *facio* (to make), as in *fecit oletum* (he made shit). Adams say it can be used solo: so *feci* would correspond to the baby-talk “I made.” While our “caca” is equally infantile, *caco* was in common use. (Adams believes it originated in the nursery and was adopted generally. Some authors, he says, considered it offensive. It abounds in graffiti.) See Adams, pp. 231–33 and throughout, for discussion of the various uses of the word and its derivatives.

classical castration narrative as a site for allegorical interpretation and the leap—across time and language—that equates “genitalia” with “holy objects” in both texts.

The Derveni papyrus is the oldest surviving European manuscript. It probably dates from around 350 BCE, but the Sophistic material it treats originated some seventy years earlier.⁴ An interpretation of a poem attributed to Orpheus, it attempts to explain certain mysteries about his rites. As such, it represents the earliest example of the allegorical method, which would become so important in Christian exegesis of holy texts. The critic who engages in this allegoresis is said to “to speak in a riddling form”⁵ In explaining a (presumably dangerous) conjugation of sacred and profane in the Orphic theogony, this exegete writes:

[I shall also prove that Orpheus composed a] hymn that tells of wholesome and permissible things. For he was speaking allegorically with his composition, and it was impossible (for him) to state the application of his words and what was meant. His composition is a strange one, riddling for people. But Orpheus did not want to tell them unbelievable riddles, but important things in riddles. In fact he is speaking allegorically from his very first word right through to his last. . .⁶

Now, in asserting that the contents of the hymn are wholesome and permissible, the writer is acknowledging that the common understanding of the verses is that they are foul

⁴ This background is supplied by Richard Janko in “The Derveni Papyrus: An Interim Text” in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 141, Verlag Rudolf Habelt (2002) pp. 1–62. Discovered in 1962, the papyrus waited forty years to be published and translated *in toto*. See also: Janko, “Socrates the Freethinker” in *A Companion to Socrates*, edited by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar. John Wiley & Sons (2009) pp. 48–62; André Laks’ “Between Religion and Philosophy: The Function of Allegory in the Derveni Papyrus” and Luc Brisson’s “Sky, Sex and Sun. The Meanings of αἰδοῖος/αἰδοῖον in the Derveni Papyrus.” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 144, Bonn: Verlag Rudolf Habelt (2003) pp. 19–29.

⁵ The verb is reconstructed as αἰνίζεται (ainizetai, from αἰνίζομαι, to speak darkly or in riddles). Similar language—such as αἴνιγμα (enigma) and ἱερολογέω (to speak a sacred word)—are used to signal the hidden, sacred, secret nature of these texts.

⁶ Janko (2002), p. 15.

and unlawful, unhygienic and anathema.⁷ That is understandable, considering what follows, regarding Zeus:

[Orpheus] makes it clear by saying as follows: 'he swallowed the penis that first had egested the ether.' Since [Orpheus] is giving hints about reality throughout his composition, one must discuss it verse by verse. He used this verse, likening the sun to a genital organ, because he saw that people believe that generation resides in genitals, and does not arise without genitals.⁸

The word translated as “penis” by Janko here is *aidoios*. This is certainly one way to read it. (And appealing to me, personally.) However, the line in which it appears may also mean “He (that is, Zeus) swallowed down the reverend one, who was the first to leap forth into ether.”⁹ The reverend one, *aidoion*, is Eros, the first-born, begetter of all subsequent gods. Of course, the generative impulse of Eros is not that far removed from the force of the phallus. A confusion between the dubious meaning of *aidoios* occurs throughout, and may explain the supposed discomfort of the earliest readers of the Orphic hymns. It occurs, for example, at *protogonon basileus aidoion*. Janko translates this: “The penis of the first-born king.” Brisson: “Of the first-born king, the reverend one.” Drawing attention to the multiple meanings of the word, Brisson remarks, “One should note that if *aidoion* always meant the same thing, allegorical interpretation would no longer have any *raison d’être*, for allegory consists in the translation of one meaning into another.”¹⁰ Brisson explains:

⁷ The ameliorating words are versions of ὑγειος (*hygeios*) and θέμις (*themis*).

⁸ Janko, p. 27. The phallophagy/fellatio “impregnates” Zeus with the other gods. Of course, in other versions of the castration, Aphrodite is born from the spermatic *aphros* (“foam”) after it is discarded in the sea. Eros, in this telling, is among the later gods, like Dionysus.

⁹ This is the translation of Luc Brisson. (See Brisson, p. 19)

¹⁰ Brisson (22) enumerates the six uses of the word *aidoios/aidoion*: “As an adjective, *aidoios* means ‘reverend,’ and as a noun ‘sexual organ’” and “The usual meaning of the neuter *aidoion* is, especially in the plural, ‘penis.’” Brisson (24) admits that word may lend itself to sexual

The semantic ambiguity concerning the couple *aidoios/aidoion* allows this result to be achieved. The commentator constantly stresses the difference between those who know how to interpret the Orphic theogony—that is, who recognize the real significance of such ambiguities—and those who do not.¹¹

Brisson, whose translation performs its own sanitizing of the Orphic text, describes a Zeus who “swallowed down the strength of the first-born king,” where *menos* is understood as “might.” But Brisson ignores the poetic potential of the word, which also means life-force, passion, and spirit, and in some texts, semen.¹² Apparently, Like de Meun’s Amant, some modern critics think balls (or their products) have no place on a respectable or reverend tongue. Brisson is a thoroughgoing critic, but his readings are too conservative, bristling at the suggestion of impropriety in the text. (Elsewhere, he is at pains to persuade against a reading of *echthore* as “ejaculate,” preferring an airy substance—but white!¹³—which merely “leaps forth” from the castrated Ouranos.) Besides ignoring the playful and powerful ambiguity of the text (made more so by its proximity to profanity), Brisson seems to miss the point of the exegesis, itself, which

punning, but in another text: Heraclitus. It is his note that led me to the Clementine citation on page 16.

¹¹ Brisson, p. 22.

¹² James Davidson enthusiastically stumps for the Homeric use of the word in this sense, where Achilles is said to “long for Patroclus’ manliness and spunk” (*potheon androteta te kai menos*). Entertaining his penchant for paronomasia and pseudo-etymology, Plato analyzes *eromenos*—the adolescent beloved—as derived from *eros* and *menos*. (See *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World*, p. 617.)

¹³ The adjective is *leukokaton* (Brisson) or *leukotera* (Janko). One need only remember how often *leukos* is paired with words that indicate semen. For example, in his theogony Hesiod describes the castration of Ouranos and the white foam (*leukos aphros*) that engenders the goddess of love. If we bear in mind that the Latin word *luceo* is related to the Greek *leukos* (white, bright), this origin scene bears some resemblance to the Vulgate’s “*Fiat lux.*” Perhaps, the Genesis exclamation can be heard as an echo of primordial ejaculation.

acknowledges that such confusion is possible (if not intended!). In his analysis of the Derveni commentary, Brisson claims that

most of the difficulties scholars have encountered in explaining the first divine successions in the theogony commented in the Derveni papyrus come from the fact that they have not understood all the complexity and the subtlety of the allegorical interpretation utilized by the commentator, who plays a very sophisticated and strange game with words and ideas.

It is my hope that the reader has indulged my own strange games.

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