



E. Jane Burns, courtesy of Ned Burns

FOUNDING FEMINISMS
IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES
ESSAYS IN HONOR OF E. JANE BURNS

Edited by
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servants are handed down the costliest imported furs (rhyming *enaigris/ gris*), leading into the personified dung's shame when overdressed. It is worth noting that the "cotehardies" mentioned here are normally considered a fourteenth-century style. This is one of the earliest attestations of the word, so the etymological sense of "bold cote," signifying a military garment, is probably quite strong. Knights should be bold, like their garments; if in other poems Baudouin encourages them to be generous, giving furs to persons without moral value is deemed misguided.

Baudouin's concerns were grounded in a social reality. Noble spending obligations, reinforced by jongleurs and minstrels such as Baudouin himself, forced the great households into constant debt. They borrowed from usurers to finance their own richer and richer clothing styles, the number of sets of which sumptuary laws attempted to limit. Such statutes also put noteworthy restrictions on gifts to companions.³⁰ *Largesse* also came at a greater and greater price. The accounts of Mahaut, the Countess of Artois in the early fourteenth century, show that she regularly received groups of "*menestaux*" and "*trompeurs*," various types of performers. They came in groups of two, three, or four, and were given money (16–21 sous each), robes, and *hanaps* (drinking cups) during their stays.³¹ It would have been difficult to turn them away, since if spurned there were plenty of songs about Avarice at their disposal for damaging the reputations of the unwelcoming host.

Baudouin dresses lords in the protective garments of their men and brave knights in a perfected heavenly mantle; he would strip unworthy heralds and minstrels of the garments bestowed upon them by undressing knights. It is worth noting that nowhere does he dress or undress a lady, in contrast with the gaze so frequently directed at the lady and her clothing in medieval narrative, as Burns and others have amply shown. It is worth remembering that the majority of financial control was in men's hands. If clerical sermons or figures such as the unhappy husband in the *Roman de la Rose* complained about women's expenditure, the reality was still that men spent more on themselves, and moreover on their expensive companions, as seen in these poems. Baudouin de Condé's works demonstrate the high tensions and acrimony between the men who fought over the knights' hand-me-downs, especially as the quality of the cast-offs became finer, and as minstrels sought to manipulate generosity with their discourses on largesse and avarice. The court subordinate's gaze was fixed on his rivals.

³⁰ Heller, "Anxiety, Hierarchy, and Appearance in Thirteenth-Century Sumptuary Laws and the *Romance of the Rose*," *French Historical Studies* 27 (Spring 2004), pp. 311–48.

³¹ Jules-Marie Richard, *Une petite nièce de Saint Louis: Mahaut Comtesse d'Artois et de Bourgogne (1302–1329)* (Paris, Champion, 1887; rpt. Cressé, Editions des Régionalismes, 2010/2013), p. 89.

John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited

RUTH MAZO KARRAS AND TOM LINKINEN

As we sat together at the *karonkka* (banquet) following Tom Linkinen's 2013 Ph.D. defense, at which Ruth Karras had been the *opponent* (outside examiner), the two of us discussed John/Eleanor Rykener, the cross-dressing prostitute from late medieval London about whom Karras and David Boyd had written in the 1990s.¹ Karras noted that if she were to write those articles over again she would suggest that we might understand Rykener as a transgender person rather than as "transvestite," the term used in that article.² Because it is very difficult to know anything about Rykener's own feelings on the topic from the medieval evidence – a brief account of Rykener's arrest and confession to various sexual acts, found in London court rolls – she had thought of making the case via fiction. However, with no experience in writing fiction, she had found the process very difficult and returned to the archives, where she felt more comfortable. Linkinen told her that he agreed about Rykener as transgender and had written a conference paper to that effect.³ After dinner, the attendees were ushered into a small theater in which, to Karras's astonishment, Linkinen and others performed a puppet show entitled "John-Eleanor," which opened up precisely this possibility.⁴ This show, which had been performed at the Turku Festival in 2012 and subsequently elsewhere in Europe, powerfully demonstrated to a contemporary audience the uses of imagination in the study of history. This work, together with the novel *A Burnable Book* by Bruce Holsinger

¹ David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1995), pp. 459–65; David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, "Ut cum muliere: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 99–116.

² We use the term "transgender" in this chapter in its broadest sense, as "movement away from an initially assigned gender position . . . [including] any and all kinds of variation from gender norms and expectations" (Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA, Seal Press, 2008), p. 19). It is thus broader than "tran[s]sexual," generally used to mean a person born with a body of one sex who wishes to have the body of a member of the other. Some activists and scholars use the term "genderqueer" for something akin to the range of meaning we here attribute to "transgender."

³ For Linkinen's scholarly take on Rykener see Tom Linkinen, *Same-Sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture*, Crossing Boundaries: Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 62–5.

⁴ http://www.turku2011.fi/en/john-eleanor_en, accessed January 28, 2014.

(2014), which makes use of the same case, indicate the hold that clothing as a signifier of gender binaries has on that imagination.⁵ These two works – which can be considered works of scholarship presented in fictional form – make the argument that it is clothes that make the medieval woman or man. In the absence of subjective indicators of medieval identities, modern scholars can rely on records of outward behavior and markers, and clothing is most prominent among these. Following the lead of Judith Bennett's work on lesbianism in the Middle Ages, we can say that even if we do not know anything about Rykener's self-identification, hir life as a male-bodied woman was "transgender-like."⁶

John Rykener, "calling hirsself Eleanor" and wearing women's clothing, was arrested while committing "that detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice" in 1394.⁷ According to the record in the London Plea and Memoranda rolls, Rykener claimed that a whore named Anna had "taught him to practice this detestable vice in the manner of a woman" and that one Elizabeth Brouderer "first dressed him in women's clothing."⁸ If taken at face value, this would suggest that Rykener had not been wearing women's clothing nor having sexual relations with men until encouraged into it by two women, and that hir choice to do so was connected with the need to earn money as a prostitute. It would have been in Rykener's interest, however, to place the blame on others for hir initiation into deviant practices, and we cannot by any means take hir testimony at face value.

Rykener indicated ze had worked in a variety of women's occupations. Ruth Evans suggested that not sticking to one type of work was one of the things that made Rykener out of place in the late medieval city.⁹ Working at a variety of tasks, however, was characteristic of women's work generally; they could not belong to the craft guilds, except alongside their husbands.¹⁰ Given differentials at the time between men's and women's wages, it is unlikely that ze chose to

⁵ Bruce Holsinger, *A Burnable Book* (New York, William Morrow, 2014).

⁶ This chapter uses a set of gender-neutral pronouns commonly used by transgender activists and practitioners of transgender studies: ze, hir, hirs, hirsself. For Bennett's work see Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000), pp. 1–24. In particular we note Bennett's comment (p. 13) that "a refusal to apply 'lesbian' to the distant past stabilizes things that are better kept in a state of productive instability . . . Is there such a stable entity as a modern lesbian? Clearly not . . . We should play with these instabilities and learn from them, not reify one in order to deny relationship with the other." See also Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 86 "on transgender-like".

⁷ Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation," p. 462. When translating Latin pronouns of indeterminate gender, Boyd and Karras used the masculine, on the grounds that the record itself uses the masculine much more often than the feminine, but they placed it in brackets. Here we have substituted gender-neutral pronouns.

⁸ Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation," p. 463.

⁹ Ruth Evans, "The Production of Space in Chaucer's London," in *Chaucer and the City*, ed. Ardis Butterfield (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 41–56, at p. 49.

¹⁰ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 160–62.

live as a woman because of these earning opportunities. Rather, embroidery and tavern work were the tasks available once ze had chosen to wear women's clothing not just on the street as a prostitute, but daily, moving to Oxfordshire, where ze was not known and could pass. This suggests that, whether or not it is true that the two women had initiated or enabled Rykener's identification as a woman by introducing hir to women's clothing and women's sexual role, ze had chosen to live that identification. However, ze also confessed to sex "as a man with many women, both married and otherwise."¹¹ Rykener wore women's clothing at least some of the time. Ze had sex with both men and women. Ze lived in a male body. Historians are faced with a difficult problem in determining whether ze thought of hirsself as a man who wore women's clothing, perhaps as a way to attract men for sex, or as a woman in a male body, or as something else.

To say that Rykener "identified as" a man or a woman is itself problematic, because medieval people did not distinguish among sex, gender, and sexual orientation, or operate with the same concepts of identity as the contemporary West. They recognized the existence of intersex bodies, or bodies that were physically of one sex but felt the desire associated with the other, but as the exception that proves the rule of the gender binary: these were monsters because they did not fit.¹² In Rykener's case the only source gives us no information about hir physical body, only about hir employment, sexual activity, and clothing. We do not know whether ze was what we would recognize as a male-identified man performing in drag (and to what extent ze performed femininity beyond the wearing of clothing), or a transsexual woman, or any of the other positions covered by the term "transgender."¹³

If we have only a hostile court record to give us access to Rykener's subjective identity, if the terms in which we categorize identities do not apply in the medieval period (transgender? cross-dresser? bisexual?), and recourse to the awkward "transgender-like" is required, one might ask what makes the case worth discussing. It is precisely because the categories medieval people used are different from contemporary ones that the case and the characters become interesting. But the case also matters in another way: it suggests to us how historians can use imagination – an imagination inevitably shaped by the culture in which we live – to fill in the gaps in the record, while being careful to note where evidence ends and imagination begins.

¹¹ Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation," p. 463.

¹² Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 122–8. The terms "monstrous" or "monstrosity" were commonly used to refer to "hermaphrodites" or those born with the genitals of both women and men, and sometimes, as in the work of Pietro d'Abano, to those men who have a blockage such that their sperm collects near the anus and they desire to be anally penetrated. Women, too, could be considered monsters, since in Aristotelian terms they were defective men.

¹³ On the distinction (under some circumstances) between a gay man in drag and a transgender person in a contemporary context, see David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007), p. 81.

"Transgender" is rooted in a particular contemporary cultural formation, part of an "epistemological imaginary" shaped by particular directions in activism, institutional practices, and various "modes of scientific and popular knowing" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.¹⁴ Contemporary GLBT studies insists on self-identification for gender as well as sexual identity, including transgender; one of the tenets of transgender studies is that transgender people's experiences of their own bodies and feelings are what defines them – not an external, and especially not a pathologized, explanation. As Pat Califa writes: "In autobiographical or fictional accounts, they may set down what they perceive to be true about themselves and the world around them, but it is the medical doctor, therapist, academic, and feminist theoretician who interpret 'them' for the rest of 'us,' and thus claim to be the voice of reality."¹⁵ But we do not have Rykener's autobiographical or fictional account. While we do not know what Rykener's self-identification would have been, it is safe to say that "transgender" was not it. Ze most likely would have thought of hirself as either a man acting as a woman, or as a woman; but we do not know which.

Nevertheless the term "transgender," precisely because it can cover so many possibilities in "variation from gender norms and expectations," is relevant for discussing Rykener. The idea of "transgender" emerged because modern society, at least some pockets of it distinguished by particular class and racial positions, has separated sexual orientation and gender identity. A contemporary transwoman may desire either men or women (or both) as sexual partners, and a contemporary man does not become transgender by desiring or having sex with men: "like hormones and surgery, the distinction between gender-normative homosexuality and transgender identity is *also* a modern technology."¹⁶ Medieval society did not make that distinction, as indeed not all contemporary people do, but that does not mean that we cannot make it analytically about those medieval individuals about whom we have evidence to work with. If we must think of medieval people only in medieval terms there would be no analysis.

If "transgender has *enabled* certain people to see themselves and others as being part of this category in order to bring about social change," it can also enable us to see historical people as being part of the category in order to bring about historical understandings that can underpin social change.¹⁷ Modern transgender studies, and transgender people, may find Rykener useful to think with, and the contemporary concept of transgender makes more visible to medievalists the range of transgender-like possibilities we may imagine for hir. To

¹⁴ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Pat Califa, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco, CA, Cleis Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.

¹⁶ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, p. 156. See also pp. 40, 57. Valentine accepts Foucault's argument that "homosexuality" only emerged as an identity in the nineteenth century. Without agreeing with him on that point, we can certainly agree that the way same-sex desire was understood changed significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹⁷ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, p. 23.

call hir a "transvestite" or "cross-dresser," as Boyd and Karras did in 1995, is limiting: ze was certainly a male-bodied person wearing women's clothing, but we cannot assume that hir gender-nonconformity was limited to clothing.

Rykener's clothing and work practices and not just hir sexual activity (or "orientation") are relevant to the question of how we can understand hir. According to hir testimony, ze had sex with both men and women, apparently being paid by the men and not the women. This distinction might indicate where hir desire lay, but it is impossible to conclude this in light of economic structures and assumptions in medieval Europe, where sex was something that men did to women and therefore not something that women paid for. Boyd and Karras raised in 1995 the question of "the construction, or lack thereof, of specific sexualities and whether such a sexuality was attributed to Rykener."¹⁸ In contemporary parlance having sexual desire for both men and women might make one bisexual, but it does not necessarily affect one's gender identity or presentation. Many, probably most, gay men identify as masculine and are seen as masculine by others, and choose partners who are similarly gender-normative. In the Middle Ages, because of the conceptual equivalence of the receptive role in sex with the feminine, a man or boy who was a bottom could be considered effeminate, regardless of gender presentation. When men are said to have sex with Rykener *ut cum muliere* ("as with a woman"), this receptive role is all that is implied.¹⁹ But in wearing women's clothing and doing women's work, Rykener went beyond the gender-crossing medieval people saw as entailed in hir sexual behavior. In other words, Rykener performed feminine gender in a variety of ways, not limited to the sexual.²⁰

It is significant that Rykener's performance was not limited to clothing. As Judith Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey point out, for the late Middle Ages there are a number of cases of female cross-dressing from London (and one other, in addition to the Rykener case, in which a man wore women's clothing). None provides as much information as Rykener's. All refer only to the clothing or hairstyle of the opposite gender, rather than to work or other behavior. Bennett and McSheffrey characterize the cross-dressing as temporary and not a real attempt to pass.²¹ It is possible that more was recorded in Rykener's case because of the particular interest of the scribe or the circumstances under which ze was arrested, but it is not possible to rule out that the others arrested for cross-dressing also had stories that went a good deal deeper. Rykener may not have been unique; but ze is unique to our knowledge.

Reading and re-reading a hostile record of a hostile questioning does not lead to a definitive understanding of what Rykener thought of hirself. The

¹⁸ Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation," p. 463.

¹⁹ Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation," p. 463.

²⁰ Cordelia Beattie, "Gender and Femininity in Medieval England," in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (London, Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp. 153–70, at pp. 155–7.

²¹ Judith M. Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien: Women Dressed as Men in Late Medieval London," *History Workshop Journal* 77 (2014), pp. 1–25.

questioning focused on sin and vice, not subjective gender identities. However, if we trust that the document is based on actual questions and answers, it suggests that Rykener was, at times, passing as a woman. The real efforts ze made to perform this social gender role indicate that it was deliberate: ze wished to pass as a woman. Besides dressing as a woman, Rykener had sex as a woman, performing as a female prostitute, to a point that the memorandum concerning hir questioning mentions “three unsuspecting scholars” in Oxford who “practiced the abominable vice often” with Rykener.²² If these scholars indeed were “unsuspecting” despite having sex with Rykener “often,” hir passing was truly effective. At least outside of London – in Oxford and then in Burford, Oxfordshire – ze passed as a woman in various gendered professions other than prostitution; ze worked as an embroideress and as a tapster.

Carolyn Dinshaw has been one of the scholars to take up the Rykener case most thoughtfully, asking not “who was Rykener and what was ze doing?” but rather “what we can do with this information. What kinds of histories, and what kinds of communities, can we create with it?” She suggests that such questions can lead to “queer historical touches” through “affective contact between marginalized people now and then.”²³ Dinshaw suggests that Rykener’s choice to take up women’s work – poorly paid, even if skilled – and to wear women’s clothing, perhaps even requesting it from the prostitute Anna who ze testified first gave it to hir, reflects queer desires.²⁴ Dinshaw’s conflation of what we might call transgender with the experience of same-sex sexual desire goes against the experience of many contemporary transgender individuals who consider themselves gay or lesbian after they have transitioned. Desiring men sexually is not necessarily part of what makes someone identify as a woman, although Dinshaw assumes that in Rykener’s case it was a part of it. By Rykener’s account ze moved back and forth between having sex with women “as a man” and with men “as a woman.” It is not clear from the record that ze switched clothing along with sexual role; a person in women’s clothing who penetrated another person would be considered to be performing “as a man.” It is even possible that Rykener was the medieval equivalent of a lesbian transwoman. The ongoing sexual relationships with men could be part of hir work life, shifting between prostitution and other forms of low paid women’s work as did so many women.

Although the question of “how did Rykener think of himself” is not definitively answerable, there are potential answers to Dinshaw’s query of “what kind of histories can we create with this information?” The inevitably speculative nature

²² Boyd and Karras, “Interrogation,” p. 463.

²³ Carolyn Dinshaw, “Queer Relations,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 16 (1999), pp. 79–99, at p. 80; Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annemarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13 (2007), pp. 177–95, at p. 178. Dinshaw uses her discussion of Rykener to set up a discussion of the Pardoner in her *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 101–42.

²⁴ Dinshaw, “Queer Relations,” p. 87.

of such histories can make some scholars uncomfortable with them. Translating them into other forms than academic writing, however, can not only open room for speculation but also bring the issues they raise before a wider audience. We present here two fictionalizations of Rykener’s experience, both of which make the argument that clothes make the woman: that changing from men’s to women’s clothing and back marked a change not just in how gender was outwardly signaled, but even in the person’s gender itself. Both works are written in the twenty-first century and imbued with twenty-first-century ideas about gender. This in itself does not differentiate them from works more formally labeled History. Fiction can use the same kind of evidence, and can construct historical arguments. Fictional histories are not held to the standards of academic peer review, but they are much more widely publicly reviewed. Especially in a field like the history of sexuality, where the only tools we have to work with are words from our own time, the line between historical scholarship and scholarship-based imaginative work is blurred, and drama and fiction become effective vehicles to give tentative answers to questions that we are not able to answer definitively.

The play *John/Eleanor*, combining medieval studies, drama, and puppetry, poses three main questions: first, the limits and possibilities of interpretation; second, which elements of drama and fiction resonate with audiences; and third, the message that the authors and production team wished to air with the play. Like scholarly interpretations based on primary historical sources, an artistic interpretation of the past can engage with probable or possible actualities. Linkinen, as a medievalist involved in creating a fictional story of John/Eleanor Rykener by means of drama and puppetry, followed an ethical commitment to “what possibly happened,” as opposed to the “what actually happened” of positivist scholarship. The postmodern turn has taught us that historical research works on levels of interpretation, as does historical fiction. Both genres bring us the probable and the possible: readers of an implausible historical novel, for example, are few. A historian who works outside the scholarly field still wants to engage with the actual as far as we can know it. From the beginning of the project that became the puppet-theater play *John/Eleanor*, Linkinen focused precisely on the possible in imagining the life of Rykener, and pondered the range of possible identities for hir.

Drama allows multiple presentations of alternatives, yet history sets limits to the possibilities. Scholars know something of what it meant to be a man or a woman in the later Middle Ages. The play had to consider what it could possibly have meant for a medieval person to be something in between. The relations between “abominable vice” and gender issues in medieval culture were also questions not to be bypassed in the production. Within these limits, questions and guidelines, Linkinen and puppeteer Timo Väntsi wrote a script for a play that premiered in Turku, Finland, in February 2011.²⁵

²⁵ A short video of clips from the performance, without dialogue, is available at <http://vimeo.com/42237789>, accessed 15 December 15, 2014, and another, with dialogue in Finnish, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59LxWHclgUE>, accessed December 15, 2014.

The play begins with a short presentation, from in the house but not onstage, by Linkinen playing a medievalist. Actor Timo Väntsi then joins Linkinen on stage, and together they introduce the audience to medieval ideas about womanhood. Väntsi appears in drag throughout, and plays a prostitute as well as Linkinen's interlocutor and the puppeteer. After the historian leaves the stage, the puppeteer uses puppets to act out one possible childhood for Rykener. The story then follows Rykener's (possible) life as told in the medieval document, the medievalist contextualizing the story and the actor reimagining it with puppets. Settings include the streets of London by day and by night; a brothel; a chapel; and Rykener's visits to Oxford and Burford in Oxfordshire. Sexual encounters, which are many, are enacted by various kinds of puppets. The puppets follow one medieval tradition of puppetry in which mere heads signify characters, with the puppeteer's hands and fingers serving as the torsos and arms of the characters. Some scenes are acted out by the puppeteer moving cardboard cutouts around on a board. Rykener is arrested in a stable near Soper's Lane, as in the fourteenth-century record, and ends up in a dungeon before being questioned by the Lord Mayor himself. While the puppet action takes place on stage, the character of Linkinen shifts from medievalist contextualizing events to queer theorist, who is encouraged enough to ponder not just probabilities but the limits of possibility. The play ends on a hopeful note; it is after all a comedy, not a tragedy. As in the original legal document, it is only an interrogation, not a trial, and the audience is left with the possibility that Rykener departs to carry on with hir life.

Presenting the possible story of Rykener through actors and puppets rather than by reading a lone document allows a story to be built through speculative presumptions and assumptions. Educated guesses can be part of interpretation in scholarly research, but the play offers more opportunities for more speculative, possibility-oriented interpretation. Actor and puppeteer Timo Väntsi is situated in a position to ask all the "impossible" questions and enact various situations of Rykener's possible life that are not touched upon in the legal record at all. Thus the play includes Rykener's possible childhood and hir fascination with female clothing, as well as the documented plot of hir entry into the practice of prostitution.

The question of audience-pleasing elements in historical drama is crucial, of course. The play should be entertaining. With this in mind, Linkinen and Väntsi decided from the beginning that a good story needs love. They added some romance in the story, but in doing so presented Rykener considering out loud how ze "didn't really know what love is," referring to the hostile framework of sin and crime with which hir culture surrounded hir possible feelings of love. A good story needs a thickening plot; hence the elements of romance are imagined and constructed in such a way that the plot leads Rykener to be betrayed and disappointed with love. While the role of love in the story came from the realm of possibility, the sexual acts came from the documentary record. The play indeed includes a lot of sexual activity, realized by means of puppetry, and involving Rykener as John, Rykener as Eleanor, and both male and female

partners. These scenes produce a good deal of laughter among the audience, but they also strike a more serious note in considering and presenting the sex acts and daily routine of a sex worker.

The goal of the play was not merely to entertain but to share a deeper message with audiences. Following Carolyn Dinshaw's questions about what we can do with historical information, what kind of stories we can create, and why, the creative team deliberately avoided depicting Rykener as a victim. Instead, they wished to create a survivor's story in which Rykener becomes the hero/ine of hir own life. In doing so they created one possibility for Rykener's story, recognizing that the plot in which ze overcomes the limits and hazards of hir own time is also relevant to contemporary audiences in a variety of ways. Rykener may have been "a freak" in hir time, but ze may not have been a victim. Raising the possibility of Rykener's having been considered a "freak" was also intended to create a situation in which members of the audience find themselves facing a "queer moment," a moment of re-thinking sexual and gender norms, both medieval and postmodern.

Where *John/Eleanor* occupies a borderline position between history and fiction – we might call it a form of creative publicly engaged history – Holsinger's *A Burnable Book* is fiction with a historical core. The poet John Gower narrates parts of this literary puzzle/murder mystery, while the rest is told in an omniscient third-person voice. Besides Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, Katherine Swynford, and John Hawkwood also appear prominently. So do a number of prostitutes, including one known as Eleanor/Edgar Rykener, who is a major character. Although Holsinger has changed the male name, he calls the character "inspired by" the Rykener case.²⁶ The events of the book are set in 1385, so they provide a plausible backstory to the 1394 legal account.

Eleanor/Edgar (Holsinger gives the name in that order in his Cast of Characters) is a "swerver," a term which Holsinger seems to have invented (it does not appear in the *Middle English Dictionary*) but which is certainly plausible as a medieval way of saying "deviant." "A man in body, a woman in soul . . . Eleanor would do all and be all for her loyal jakes," or alternatively "[a] man in body, but in soul a man and a woman both . . ."²⁷ Rykener "start[ed] to discover her second life" at the age of thirteen, becoming a prostitute at sixteen after a period of wardship in a household where the wife made hir work hard and the husband "wouldn't leave her alone once he found out what she was."²⁸ Younger brother Gerald Rykener, cautioned that the butcher to whom he is apprenticed is a dubious character, recognizes his sibling's doubleness: "Part of him knew his brother was right – well, his sister – his broster, his sither, whichever way in God's name Edgar-Eleanor was swerving these days . . ."²⁹

When speaking as omniscient narrator, Holsinger chooses the name/pronoun

²⁶ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 440.

²⁷ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, pp. 44, 89.

²⁸ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 90.

²⁹ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, pp. 102–3.

for his character depending on the clothing ze is wearing at a given moment. In one two-paragraph sequence, “by Vespertime her tongue, her lips, her arse, even her cock ached from a day of hard use. She needed cider . . . She shed her dress and pulled on her breeches . . . Edgar was able to nudge himself a space on the broad hearth, where he sipped contentedly and watched the crowd.”³⁰ Similarly, the narrator describes how Rykener, in effect, changes pronouns:

Grimes’ shop and yard on Cutter Lane were empty, as she knew they would be. Eleanor peered over the streetside fence, spying exactly what she had hoped to find: a row of clothes drying on the line. She vaulted the fence, took what she needed, and stripped off her dress, bunching it into her bag for later. She pulled on a pair of breeches and a one-piece shirt of the sort favored by the butchers. An old pair of slaughter boots, found in the corner of the first barn, completed the outfit, though as Edgar left the yard he grabbed a stained apron from a hook and wrapped it around his middle. He roughed up his hair, put on a cap, smeared a bit of ash on his cheeks and brow, then left the butchers’ precinct the way he had come, heading for the palace, and Gerald’s fate.³¹

The implicit claim here, as the omniscient narrator briefly adopts Rykener’s point of view, is that Rykener thinks of herself as gendered according to the clothing ze is currently wearing.

But as the (no doubt deliberately) jarring phrase “her cock” indicates, the character Eleanor tops men even when she is wearing women’s clothing; some, if not all of her customers, choose her for this reason and not because they mistake her for a ciswoman. One customer, James Tewburn, “liked to take it as a woman, mouth and arse alike,” with Eleanor in women’s clothing: “[h]e didn’t recognize Edgar in mannish garb. Not yet,” but he is certainly aware that Eleanor is equipped with a penis, and later when Edgar visits him in his office in men’s clothing Tewburn recognizes him and then fellates him.³² John/Eleanor Rykener in the court case, however, had sexual relations with men “as a woman” and with women “as a man,” without it being entirely clear that this refers to clothing rather than sexual role. It is no secret to characters in *A Burnable Book*, even outside the milieu of the prostitutes, that Rykener is a cross-dresser. Gerald’s master recognizes Eleanor when he sees her: “Get that swervin’ Ganymede outta my boy’s way.”³³ The fact that a stranger thinks Edgar is “a young woman taking on a man’s role” indicates a certain androgyny in appearance.³⁴ In Holsinger’s account, Rykener moves back and forth between genders rather easily; people are aware of it, and it is only the butchers who seem particularly bothered by it.

While medieval people would perhaps have understood a “woman’s soul in a man’s body” or a man who wished to have sex with men also wishing to be

³⁰ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 184.

³¹ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 348.

³² Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, pp. 115, 176–7.

³³ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 337.

³⁴ Holsinger, *A Burnable Book*, p. 231.

a woman, they may have had less understanding of transgender as a refusal to be bound by gender conventions, at least within the secular world (religious texts bent gender in a variety of ways, although these tended to be more metaphorical). Some transgender people today wish to, and do, transition from one sex to the other permanently through surgery and hormones. Others do so without medical intervention by changing their name, dress, and behaviors. And others – many of whom prefer the term “genderqueer” – do not wish to pass as members of the “opposite” gender but to occupy new gender positions, to refuse to specify M or F, he or she, to “expand the number of acceptable ways of being gendered.”³⁵ Rykener was caught in a binary because of the society in which ze lived. Ze may have wished to be a woman, but ze may not have known the possibility of being neither a man nor a woman. Yet, as the play *John/Eleanor* plausibly suggests, ze was a survivor working within the limits of the possible for hir time. Through the use of clothing ze could stake out, not a middle position, but a flexible one that went back and forth. The limits of representing a fluid identity on stage or in a novel – the need to use clothing with which to do it – corresponds to the limits of the historian’s knowledge of a subject’s identity. It is in using that clothing to present herself in the way ze chose that Rykener was perhaps transgender-like.³⁶

³⁵ Laurel Westbrook, “Becoming Knowably Gendered: The Production of Transgender Possibilities and Constraints in the Mass and Alternative Press from 1990–2005 in the United States,” in *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity* (New York, Routledge, 2010), pp. 43–63, at p. 50. A useful recent discussion of gender diversity and transgender, with perhaps more sympathy for transgender people who wish to remain within a gender binary than for theorists who wish to do away with the binary, is Patricia Elliot, *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010), esp. pp. 33–41.

³⁶ Jeremy Goldberg, “John Rykener, Richard II and the Governance of London,” *Leeds Studies in English* N.S. 45 (2014), 49–70, which appeared too late for us to take account of it in this chapter, provides a detailed argument that the Record was written as a critical allegory against Richard II.

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