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Sacred space and disruptive bodies in the high and late Middle Ages

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how women disrupted sacred space and attempts to maintain gendered divisions in areas dedicated to religious use in the high and late Middle Ages. Drawing on examples mainly from England and France from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, it shows that women consciously transgressed sacred space in acts of both protest and piety. The reform movements of the eleventh century had consolidated and given new importance to existing norms, which an increasingly centralised episcopacy sought to push through more systematically. From the point of view of reformists and bishops, sacred space was an expression of divine order, but one under threat from forces of disorder and pollution, epitomised in the female body – transgressive, marginal and unbound. Whether dancing in monastic precincts or merely seeking proximity to the holiest of spaces, medieval women posed a challenge to the gendered order of sacred space. This potential for disruption was at times harnessed by secular men using the bodies of marginalised women such as prostitutes in symbolically charged attacks on clerical masculinity. Women would, however, often find allies and champions among clerics who supported the breaking of gendered boundaries and ignored the demands of custom and ecclesiastical authority.

KEYWORDS

Medieval history; sacred space; women; gender

In an early modern French version of the *vita* of Robert of Arbrissel (d. 1116), the founder and leader of the dual monastic community at Fontevrault, there is a brief but instructive account of his and his female companions' arrival at the monastery church of Ménat in the Auvergne region in 1114. On attempting to enter the church they were told that the local saint, Ménélée (d. 720), had once cursed all women, and that God would visit any female trespasser with a swift death.[1] Robert, the *vita* tells us, would have none of it, and marched in with his companions, while the gatekeepers and others shouted and prayed for St Ménélée to intervene. He then delivered a fiery sermon in which he argued

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[1]This probably implied a horizontal gender separation, with women standing by the entrance of the church and thus behind the men inside. Ménélée's alleged misogyny appears to date back to a cluster of legends from the ninth century in the Auvergnat – after the monastery had fallen under the sway of the monastic reformer Benedict of Aniane. See J. Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, sin, and salvation in the Middle Ages*, trans. B.L. Vernarde (Washington, DC, 2006), 107–11. See also J. Dalarun, 'Eve, Marie, ou Madeleine? La dignité du corps féminin dans l'hagiographie médiévale (VI^{e}–XII^{e} siècles)', *Médiévales*, 8 (1985), 18–32.

that if women were worthy enough to receive the body and blood of Christ, then they must also be allowed into a church.[2] While the *vita* focuses on Robert's argumentation, drawing on the logic of the eucharist as trumping any attempt to gender sacred space, it is the female bodies themselves, whose movement through gendered space contradicted the alleged power of the saint, that is by far the most disruptive. Robert's homily emphasised the sanctity of women and women's bodies as tabernacles and worthy receptacles of Christ's body by comparing the women to Mary, who had carried God in her womb, and to Mary Magdalene, who had kissed the Saviour's feet and had been the first to see him resurrected, as noted by Jacques Dalarun.[3] Here, then, bodies are both physically and rhetorically placed disruptively in a space, the perceived sacrality of which depended to no small extent on total gender exclusion. The disruption happens first, therefore, as a bodily and spatial act, and is justified after the fact by Robert's rhetoric.

Rather than the hagiographer's focus on Robert's words, I am interested here in the transgressive movements of the women, speaking with their bodily movements. More specifically, I am interested in how lay bodies, and especially female bodies, were perceived as disrupting a space that relied on the careful regulation of behaviour; on the separation between laity and clergy, male and female; and on the observance of purity regulations as well as how such anxieties were expressed and used in polemical rhetoric and acts that weaponised women's bodies against supposedly celibate men and their spaces.

This article argues that, as we saw in the opening example, women and their wordless movements could pose a profound challenge to a space coded as exclusively masculine or exerting control over women's movements. The notion that women's bodies, especially when sexualised, were potentially disruptive and pollutive in certain sacred spaces was a common assumption. Such assumptions about the dangers of women shaped the representations of conflicts by monastic and reformist writers (primarily chronicles and letters), whose mixture of rhetorical exaggeration and historical reality can be engaged with productively. Rather than dismissing these sources outright as monastic exaggerations, I consider the assumptions and fears that underpinned them as potential weapons to be used by the churchmen's opponents playing on their fear of pollutive women. In other words: churchmen feared pollutive bodies, and their lay opponents were fully aware of that. In contrast with these rather ambiguous sources, later materials – by no means neutral but often more reliable – produced mainly by bishops from the thirteenth century onwards, give a different picture in which women show their own agency, appearing in restricted areas on their own initiatives, often with the support of local clergy. This provides a valuable window into local parochial realities and practices, reflecting the cultural shifts in the wake of the pastoral revolution of the thirteenth century and the centrality of parochial life for lay devotion.

The spatial turn in the humanities has over the past several decades led to a broad output of scholarship in the field of medieval history and cultural studies. As a part of this

[2]J. Dalarun, G. Giordanengo, A. le Huërou, J. Longère, D. Poirel and B.L. Venarde (eds), *Les deux vies de Robert d'Arbrissel Fondateur de Fontevraud. Légends, écrits et témoignages./The Two Lives of Robert of Arbrissel Founder of Fontevraud: Legends, writings, and testimonies* (Turnhout, 2006), chapters 71 and 72: 1–5, 296–97. For a discussion by Dalarun of the historicity of the *vita* regarding the events described, see *ibid*., 111, n. 302.
[3]Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel*, *op. cit*., 117.

movement, a sub-field has emerged, occupied with the evolution and significance of sacred space, in particular the evolution of the church as sacred space, especially from French scholars inspired by the theorisation of space in the 1970s and 1980s.[4] Anglophone scholarship has seen valuable contributions as well, focusing in particular on issues of immunities and sanctuary.[5] The contribution of this article to this expanding field lies, then, in asking not only how such spaces embodied conceptions of gender, status and power, but more importantly how such relations were challenged, or were imagined to be, through bodily and disruptive acts involving women in sacred space.

This article will follow a diachronic structure, beginning at c.1100 and moving up eventually to the fifteenth century. It focuses on cases from England and France, with some examples from elsewhere in Western Christendom. Following an introductory discussion outlining how sacred space embodied gender divisions and anxieties about lay and in particular female bodies, we will look at a cluster of cases from c.1100–c.1200 in which women appear either of their own accord or as a means employed by others to disrupt sacred space – challenging, teasing and taunting celibate clergy. The article ends with a consideration of late medieval cases drawn mainly from episcopal registers and other ecclesiastical administrative documents as well as examples taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

The source material changes significantly over the period covered by this article. At the beginning, around 1100, we are dealing with letters (often highly polemical), legends and chronicles, and only later, from the second half of the thirteenth century, will episcopal registers, documenting bishops' correspondence and administration, and visitation records become a regular feature. These are valuable sources for studying how boundaries between genders, as well as between clerics and laypeople, were maintained on the parochial level, and because they often rely on multiple witnesses and 'trustworthy men' in seeking to establish the basis for how the bishop was to proceed in a matter.[6] The earlier material, on the other hand, is at times rather fanciful and one would be justified in suspecting that clerical paranoia about gender transgression (as outlined by Jo Ann McNamara in her seminal article on the crisis of masculinity in the wake of the Gregorian reform) got the better of the author.[7] Rather than trying to fully resolve such ambiguities,

[4]H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991); M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley, 1988). Particularly noteworthy are the works by André Vauchez, Michel Lauwers, Julien Théry, Éric Palazzo and Dominique Iogna-Prat. See: A. Vauchez, *Sanctuaires Chrétiennes d'Occident: IV^e–XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 2021); A. Vauchez (ed.), *Lieux sacrés, lieux de culte, sanctuaires: Approches terminologique, méthodologiques, historiques et monographiques* (Rome, 2000); M. Lauwers, *Naissance du cimetière: Lieux sacrés et terres des morts dans l'Occident medieval* (Paris, 2005); see also J. Théry (ed.), *Lieux sacrés et espace ecclésial, IX^e–XV^e siècle*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 46 (Paris, 2011); É. Palazzo, *L'espace ritual et le sacré dans le Christianisme: La liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'antiquité et au moyen âge* (Turnhout, 2008), *Liturgie et societé au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2000); D. Iogna-Prat, *La maison Dieu: Une histoire monumentale de l'Eglise au Moyen Âge, v.800–v.1200* (Paris, 2006).

[5]E. Allen, *Uncertain Refuge: Sanctuary in the literature of medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2021); S. McSheffrey, *Seeking Sanctuary: Crime, mercy, and politics in English courts, 1400–1500* (Oxford, 2017); B. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, restraint, and privileges of immunity in early medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1999). For a longer historical perspective on early Christianity and sacred space, see J.E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The myth of Jewish-Christian origins* (Oxford, 1993). Laura Varnam's recent study of the church as sacred space in medieval English literature is a welcome contribution that combines the theoretical insights of Lefebvre and de Certeau to examine how sacred space was conceived of and represented in literature. L. Varnam, *The Church as Sacred Space in Middle English Literature and Culture* (Manchester, 2018).

[6]On trustworthy men and their role in the governance of the diocese, see I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How faith and inequality made the medieval church* (Princeton, 2018).

[7]See J.A. McNamara, 'The *Herrenfrage*: the restructuring of the gender system, 1050–1150' in C.A. Lees, Th. S. Fenster and J.A. McNamara (eds), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1994), 3–29.

I engage with them as products of medieval religious culture to reveal more precisely how sacred space, gender and social status intersected and how sacred space conceivably functioned as an arena saturated with symbolic meaning, where various social struggles were enacted.

In the second part of this article, we will turn to a selection from the episcopal registers and registers of visitation from England and Normandy, in particular that of Eudes Rigaud, archbishop of Rouen 1248–1275. While Rigaud's register is a rich source, it is relatively unique in France, where only a very small number of visitation records and episcopal registers survive. In England, on the other hand, far more registers have been preserved and edited by learned societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and these allow us to study parochial life and episcopal policies in greater detail and with more reliability.[8]

I have thus cast a rather wide net in order to capture a phenomenon that occurs in various localities across Western Christendom. This is, in fact, necessary, as spectacular and intentional interventions in sacred space (such as that by Robert and his companions) were shocking by the fact that they were rare in a given locality, as Chris Wickham notes regarding interventions in Rome. If every other service or procession was disturbed by rowdy laypeople, Wickham points out, the action would lose some of its edge.[9] Likewise, in the episcopal registers and visitation records, it appears that once a matter of transgression (or the deeper conflict motivating it) has been dealt with, it rarely resurfaces again, as far as the surviving evidence can show. It is therefore necessary to look at the phenomenon not only through a *longue durée*, but also comparatively between regions to see how a disruptive act could be situated in local disputes, and to understand the larger issues regarding gender and ecclesiastical authority that were at stake. By no means can this article be said to be exhaustive, then, given this broad scope; rather, it should be considered an essay, an attempt, to capture a phenomenon across the material that deserves further study.

I will throughout this article refer to sacred space in both a strict and a more extended capacity. In the strictest sense, sacred space was the area designated for worship centred on the altar and consecrated for this use by a bishop.[10] By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, cemeteries had become consecrated as well and could thus offer asylum to men and women on the run from justice.[11] But the concept of sacred space can also be taken in a more generous, expansive sense to include the whole area of, for instance, a monastery in the sense that it was 'set apart' (the root meaning of the Latin *sacer*) from the mundane and thus engendering conceptions of a divine order.[12] Other examples of sacred space in

[8]I think here of, for instance, The Canterbury and York Society, The Lincoln Record Society and The Surtees Society, that have produced whole series of registers.

[9]C. Wickham, *Medieval Rome: Stability and crisis of a city 900–1150* (Oxford, 2015), 345.

[10]This is the standard and influential definition offered by the twelfth-century liturgist Jean Beleth, *Summa de ecclesiasticis officiis*, ed. H. Douteil, Corpus christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis, 41a (Turnhout, 1976), 2c.

[11]On the emergence of cemeteries as consecrated sacred space, see Lauwers, *op. cit.* C. Treffort, 'Consécration de cimetière et contrôle episcopal des lieux d'inhumation au X^{e} siècle' in M. Kaplan (ed.), *Le sacré et son inscription dans l'espace à Byzance et en Occident: Études comparées* (Paris, 2001), 285–99; É. Zadora-Rio, 'Lieux d'inhumation et espaces consacrés: Le voyage du pape Urbain II en France (Août 1095–Août 1096)' in Vauchez, *Lieux sacrés, lieux de culte*, *op. cit*., 197–213; H. Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013), 39–54.

[12]For a discussion of 'sacrality' in medieval Christian culture see J.-C. Schmidt, 'La notion de sacré et son application a l'histoire du christianisme médiéval', *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 9 (1992), 1–8.

this wider, transferred sense (what Éric Palazzo has termed *la dilatation du sacré* – the expansion of the sacred) include processions with the consecrated host, which were considered by some canonists as able to offer asylum just as wayside crosses were, and the practice of using portable altars (containing relics) for masses outside of regularly consecrated space, which brings the holy out into the world.[13]

Space, sacrality and pollution

By virtue of its status as sacred, as 'set apart' from the rest of the world, Christian sacred space was subject to different rules (canon law), and habits of movement and speech, compared to the surrounding world. It also reflected, reinforced and elevated notions of gender hierarchy and patriarchal notions of female bodies as potentially pollutive. The separation of gendered bodies in sacred space is by no means a new feature, however. It is discernible in normative Christian sources as early as the third century (for instance, the *Didascalia apostolorum*), although the practice may be older and likely inspired by Graeco-Roman practices rather than Jewish practice (for which evidence of gender separation is of a later date).[14] Gender separation would either take form horizontally with men in the front and women in the back of the assembly (with internal gradations based on status), or vertically with women to the left (north) and men on the right (south) side in the building, which became the most common form. Liturgical commentators from the ninth century on through to the twelfth, such as Amalar of Metz (775–850), Honorius Augustodunensis (1080?–1140?), and Guillaume Durand (c.1230–1296), provided various rationales for gender separation. One such was to prevent lust; another was that women had lured Adam at the instigation of the serpent; yet another was that men should be placed on the south side of the church, which signified proximity to spiritual danger which they – seen as the stronger sex – were more capable of withstanding.[15] These arrangements and the fear of infringements upon them inspired moralising *exempla* popularised through texts such as Robert of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* which tells of how the devil in the shape of a woman tempts a deacon serving St John Chrysostom during mass. The sin of the deacon disrupts the sanctity of the mass, as the sainted bishop could no longer see the holy Spirit descend in the shape of a dove as he normally did.[16] Other passages in the same collection warn of women chattering in church, their allure, and of sex in churches.[17]

[13] É. Palazzo, *L'espace ritual et le sacré dans le Christianisme: La liturgie de l'autel portatif dans l'antiquité et au moyen âge* (Turnhout, 2008), 44. See also his discussion of liturgy, movement and space in *Liturgie et societé, op. cit*., especially 58–71 and 124–39. On eucharistic processions as capable of offering asylum, see T.M. Izbicki, The *Eucharist in Medieval Canon Law* (Cambridge, 2015), 108–09.

[14] R.H. Conolly (ed. and trans.), *Didascalia apostolorum: The Syriac version translated and accompanied by the Verona Latin fragments* (Oxford, 1929), 119. On Christian vs. Jewish practice, see T. Berger, *Gender Difference and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a veil on liturgy's past* (Abingdon, 2011), 60.

[15] Amalarius of Metz, *On the Liturgy*, ed. and trans. Eric Knibbs, *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library*, 35, 36, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 3.2. Honorius Augustodunensis, *The Jewel of the Soul*, ed. and trans. Z. Thomas and G. Eger, *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* 79–80 (Cambridge, MA), 1, 268–70. Guillaume Durant, *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, ed. A. Davril and T.M. Thibodeau, Corpus christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis, 140, 140a, 140b, 3 vols (Turnhout, 1995). Among the main commentators on the church and liturgy, Sicard of Cremona and William of Auxerre are silent on the matter of gender separation.

[16] Robert of Brynne's *Handlyng Synne, A.D. 1303, with the French treatise on which it is founded, Le manuel des pechiez, by William of Wadington*, ed. F.J. Furnivall (London, 1862), 278–81.

[17] *ibid*., 277–92.

It is important to note here that liturgical commentaries were based on the practice of the major (and in particular cathedral) churches, and were thus not universally applicable, but often adapted as far as the layout of a particular church dictated. Nave divisions, for instance, were far from always feasible and one could expect that the sexes mingled more during mass than the commentators would be comfortable with. However, sacred space was theoretically meant to be free from lustful looks, words and thoughts, and a place where one half were perpetually reminded of their association with Eve's role in the Fall. The onus thus fell on women to avoid tempting men, and therefore to remain in their allocated place.

The centuries following the reform movement of the eleventh century saw the crisis of gender roles which Jo Ann McNamara termed the *herrenfrage*, and which demanded a reassertion of male, and in particular clerical, dominance.[18] Although this position was later criticised and nuanced by scholars emphasising the role of women in the reform movement, it is clear that this period had an impact on sacred spaces and how they were gendered amid clerical attempts to reinforce boundaries between men and women.[19] In addition to the example with which this article began, one can consider the example of Ely, north of Cambridge, where the monastery once founded by St Aethelthryth (636–679) had been a double monastery, but became a male-only monastery at its refoundation in 970. In 1154, a series of male saints were introduced in the cathedral – warriors, bishops and priests – whose monuments served as a male gloss on the cult of the founder abbess and her sainted (female) successors.[20] At Durham, following the introduction of monks from Wearmouth and Jarrow in 1083 to replace the secular canons, and the completion of the new cathedral in 1104, Saint Cuthbert appears to have acquired a previously unheard of misogyny, threatening to punish any woman who dared to approach his relics (now placed behind the high altar).[21]

Elsewhere, women faced complete exclusion, in particular from monastic precincts. As Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes, gender-based exclusion became a particular problem for women from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, due to the rising importance of relics and access to them, while reformist movements (the Carolingian, Cluniac and Gregorian reforms) stressed the potential dangers women posed to ritual purity and celibacy. Female monastic spaces, on the other hand, had to be more permeable to allow male clergy and workers to come in as well as pilgrims in cases where the church had an important shrine. The exclusionary policies were thus unevenly distributed and men did

[18]Practices of separation varied, however. As Donal Cooper has noted, Italian churches had temporary separations of sexes by curtains and archival evidence points to the permeability of the boundaries. D. Cooper, 'Recovering the lost rood screens of Medieval and Renaissance Italy' in S. Bucklow, R. Marks and L. Wrapson (eds), *The Art and Science of the Church Screen in Medieval Europe: Making, meaning, preserving* (Woodbridge, 2017), 220–45, here 234–43.

[19]For a discussion of women and reform, see F.J. Griffiths, 'Women and reform in the Central Middle Ages' in J. Bennet and R. Karras (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Studies* (Oxford, 2013), 447–63.

[20]K. Weikert, 'Ely cathedral and the afterlife of Earldorman Byrhtnoth' in A. Langland and R. Lavelle (eds), *The Land of the English Kin: Studies in Wessex and Anglo-Saxon England in honour of Professor Barbara Yorke* (Leiden and Boston, 2020), 555–81. On the gendered tensions between the monastic community and their main saint, see also M. Otter, 'The temptation of St. Aethelthryth', *Exemplaria*, 9 (1997), 139–63, especially 161–63.

[21]W.M. Aird, 'The boundaries of medieval misogyny: gendered urban spaces in medieval Durham' in L. Klusakova and L. Teulieres (eds), *Frontiers and Identities: Cities in regions and nations* (Pisa, 2008), 49–73. See also J.T. Schulenburg, 'Gender, celibacy, and proscriptions of sacred space: symbol and practice' in V.C. Raguin and S. Stanbury (eds), *Women's Space: Patronage, place, and gender in the medieval church* (Albany, 2005), 185–206, here 189–91.

not face the threats of spiritual punishments or the avenging wrath of the saints in the same way as women.[22]

Principles of total gender exclusion could be applied not only to a church but to a whole area. Various rules for male monasteries composed between the fifth and twelfth centuries strictly forbade women from entering the monastic grounds, at times even forbidding them from so much as setting foot in the forests where the monks had their cells.[23] Miracle stories recorded by Gregory of Tours mention how a woman entering the sacred space to see the pillar of St Symeon was immediately struck dead by divine wrath – not unlike the alleged punishment for women daring to enter the monastic church at Ménat.[24]

Yet female bodies also carried with them the threat of ritual pollution in connection with menstruation and childbirth. Women may enter the church to give thanks on the same day as giving birth, Honorius concedes, but must otherwise remain outside, because 'they signify the unclean who are excluded from the heavenly temple'. If they have had intercourse during their period, they were expected to remain outside.[25] Menstruation was a recurrent source of anxiety among clerical writers. Early Christian texts offered a variety of views on whether women could attend religious gatherings and receive the eucharist while menstruating. Gregory the Great's (c.540–604) lenient position – that it was possible to receive it, but that it would be more praiseworthy to abstain – appears to eventually have lost out to the stricter view.[26] Naturally, if such arrangements were ever attempted to be upheld, they ultimately had to rely on trust, as there was no simple way in which a woman's suitability to attend church and receive the eucharist could be verified. As Margaret Aston noted: 'Though it was originally the pollution of blood that was the danger, the difficulty of knowing when women were seasonally affected in this way rendered them perennially suspect'.[27] Following childbirth, women were expected to undergo churching – the ritual cleansing that freed them from blood pollution which allowed them to re-enter into the church and church life.

These attitudes underwent some changes in the high and late Middle Ages, as we will see, when focus was increasingly placed on intentionality and what constituted legitimate sexual relations, rather than on the dangers posed by 'impure' bodies to space.[28] As Paula Rieder has shown in her study of churching of women in northern France, bishops began to move the emphasis away from focusing on ritual impurity as a danger to sacred space in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, being more concerned with re-establishing women's roles as wives capable of legitimate sexual union with their spouses. Clergy, meanwhile, often retained the older notion of maintaining the ritual integrity of sacred space.[29]

[22]Schulenburg, *op. cit*., 193, 199. See Rosenwein, *op. cit*., 41 who refers to Caesarius of Arles's *Rule for Virgins* (*Regula ad virgines*) enumerating the cases in which men – clergy and workers – were allowed into the precincts. Caesarius of Arles *Regula ad virgines, Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844–1864), 67: 1114a–b.
[23]Schulenburg, *op. cit*., 187–88.
[24]Rosenwein, *op. cit*., 41.
[25]Honorius Augustodunensis, *op. cit*., 1: 269–70.
[26]Berger, *op. cit*., ch. 4. The *Institutions of Aachen* (816–19), for instance, prohibits women religious from attending the liturgies of the hours while menstruating: *ibid*., 108–09.
[27]M. Aston, 'Segregation in church' in W.B. Sheils and D. Wood (eds), *Women in the Church: Papers read at the 1989 summer meeting and the 1990 winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford, 1990), 244–45.
[28]D. Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, sexuality & demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), see in particular chapter 3, 'Sex in Holy Places', 61–80.
[29]P.M. Rieder, *On the Purification of Women: Churching in northern France, 1100–1500* (New York, 2006).

In the high and late Middle Ages, anxieties about pollution and women came to the fore with some vehemence during and following the eleventh-century reform movement, along with the increasing ability of popes and bishops to push through notions of order and purity and a clear drive to separate and protect the sacred from pollutive forces. Simony, clerical marriage and lay investiture were all, in the eyes of the reformers, worldly encroachments on the sacred, diseases threatening pollution. Around the time of the controversy regarding the real presence of Christ in the eucharist initiated by Berengar of Tours (d. 1088), the increasing centrality and heightened reverence for the sacrament led to greater care in distinguishing the worthy from the unworthy. Women in particular posed a serious threat to the dignity of the sacrament and the clergy assigned to celebrate it. Just as Christ took human form in the womb of a virgin, so the men consecrating his body and blood on the altar should be continent, Peter Damian (d. 1072) argued. Only pure hands, unpolluted by women, were allowed to handle the body that had come about without male seed.[30] It is in this climate that writers and moralists such as Marbod of Rennes (d. 1123), Geoffrey of Vendôme (d. 1132) and Hildebert of Lavardin (d. 1133) reuse and greatly amplify extreme misogynistic topoi from the church fathers.[31] With the reform of the clergy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there followed, as Dyan Elliot notes, an accompanying surge in moralistic *exempla* and other stories regarding sacrilegious sex – sexual acts taking place in sacred space, including on altars, and the divine punishments of the offenders.[32] Women were in fact forbidden from even touching the chalice and altar cloths.[33] Just as the status of sacred space was precarious and vulnerable to transgressive bodies, the status of clerical bodies was equally precarious: as Elliot also notes, making a member of the clergy break his vow of celibacy was according to some even more serious than violating sacred space.[34] While fear of pollution was a central concern among the reformists, it also crystallised over time to focus on intentional pollution. Guillaume Durand insisted that only blood or semen intentionally shed could pollute the site.[35] If, say, someone fell and blood was shed it would not affect the ritual status of the church, but if someone were to have intercourse in church it would be an intentional act that was therefore polluting.

For our time period, then, we are not necessarily dealing with the invention of new ideas and norms, but rather a development of them along with a new sense of urgency in the context of reform and the attempts to enforce norms in a more systematic fashion and in minute detail. This enforcement becomes particularly clear from the thirteenth century onwards, when episcopal power had become more centralised and could draw from an expanded and more efficient administration, as well as from better structures of oversight. The high and late Middle Ages saw an effort from the bishops to police the boundaries in churches more systematically, to mark out the status of the clergy as separate from the laity.

[30]Peter Damian, *Contra Intemperatos Clericos, Patrologia Latina*, *op. cit*., 145: 387–88. See also 393 where he laments: 'Manus quae deputatae fuerant ad ordinandas in coelestis mensae ferculo vitales epulas angelorum, tractare non metuunt obscoenitates et spurca contagia mulierum.' ('The hands that were assigned to set the life-giving meal on the table do not fear the foulness and impure contagion of women.')
[31]J. Dalarun, 'The clerical gaze', trans. A. Goldhammer, in C. Klapisch-Zuber (ed.), *A History of Women in the West, 2: Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 27–42.
[32]Elliot, *op. cit*., 61–69.
[33]*ibid*., 66–67.
[34]*ibid*., 67.
[35]Durant, Rationale *op. cit*., i. vi. 39–40 (1: 79–80).

English synodal statutes from the 1220s to 1240s, including the influential statutes of bishop Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln (1235–1253), sought to prevent the laity from having access to the choir and chancel.[36] French synodal statutes make similar prohibitions, referring to laypeople standing or sitting in the choir during the divine office or during mass.[37] These guidelines concern primarily the division between clergy and laity, but in cases of lay transgression, the presence of women – on their own or together with men – in the choir would be remarked upon by the bishop.

Transgression by women of spaces coded as masculine never required ritual cleansing, but nevertheless constituted an ever-present threat to a given site's ritually constituted sacrality – its set-apartness – and its gendering. While pollution, in the strict technical sense, is clearly delineated to include contaminating fluids and bodies of people separated from the faithful (the unbaptised, excommunicated, heretic and sometimes unchurched mothers), we can also understand pollution in its wider sense (proposed by Mary Douglas) as disorder and displacement, of spatial and bodily transgression that required discipline and the imposition of order.[38]

It would be a mistake, however, to accept normative pronouncements by bishops and synods as a universally accepted and implemented practice, since far from every layperson, cleric, prior or abbot complied with tightening restrictions. In registers, visitation records and ecclesiastical court records it is quite clear that attempts to cordon off the choir met with resistance from the laity, often with the tacit knowledge and at times active cooperation of the clergy, as we will see in the final part of this article. In fact, bishops and clergy often struggled to maintain general order in churches and ensure separation between the laity and celebrating clergy. Partly, this has to do with cultural and social changes, as I discuss later on, but it was also a general and pre-existing problem, one that we gain a fuller picture of with the emergence of new modes of ecclesiastical governance and documentation in the thirteenth century.[39] Churches and chapels were thus not only sacred, but social, spaces, an integrated part of society in which the laity had a stake. The sacrality of churches and chapels is therefore not something straightforward and given once and for all, but negotiated and precarious, vulnerable to various kinds of interventions, both real and invented or exaggerated by anxiety-ridden clerics and reformists. The nature of the challenges to sacred space (real or imagined) changed over time, however, and the source materials change as well, as we move from the age of reforms in the long twelfth century to the period after the fourth Lateran council in 1215.

[36]On the sources of and influence of Grosseteste's statutes, see C.R. Cheney, *English Synodalia of the 13th Century* (Oxford, 1941), 121–22, 124–41. For synodal statutes concerning laypeople in the chancel, see F.M. Powicke and C.R. Cheney (eds), *Councils and Synods: With other documents relating to the English church II: 1205–1313; Part I: 1205–1265; Part II: 1265–1313*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1964), 1: 174, 275, 297, 443. Margaret Aston notes that these statutes follow the so-called 'Canons of Edgar', an Old English rendering of the capitularies of Theodulf of Orleans: Aston, *op. cit.*, 244; see D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C. Brooke (eds), *Councils and Synods: With other documents relating to the English church, Vol 1, Part 1: 871–1066; Part 2: 1066–1204*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1981), 1: 328–29.

[37]Thus, the synodal statutes of Carcassonne (c.1270); Joseph Avril (ed.), *Les statuts synodaux français du XIII^e siècle. Tome VI: les statuts synodaux des anciennes provinces de Bourges et de Narbonne* (Paris, 2011), Carcassonne, IX.6. See also the synod of Nantes (1370), which in its seventh statute expressed itself even more strictly than Carcassonne. *Thesaurus novus anecdotorum*, ed. E. Martène and U. Durand, 5 vols (Paris, 1717), 4: 962.

[38]M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of pollution and taboo* (Abingdon, 2002), see in particular chapters 6 and 7.

[39]The Council of Tours in 567, for instance, sought to prevent laity from standing in the choir during mass. See Rosenwein, *op. cit.*, 40–41.

Dancing, defecating and disrupting

We get a sense of how disruptive lay and female bodies were perceived to be in the account by Geoffrey of Vendôme (1065/1070–1132) of the episcopal election in Angers in 1101. Geoffrey, abbot of Vendôme, cardinal, and close ally of the recently deceased pope Urban II, had been invited by the cathedral chapter of Angers to provide aid and counsel during the episcopal election. The see had fallen vacant that year following the deposition of bishop Geoffrey de Mayenne by pope Paschal II, and a young man named Renaud de Martigné – not yet in holy orders – had the support of count Fulk IV of Anjou, from whom Renaud received investiture, as well as the influential bishop Marbod of Rennes.[40] Tensions were high even before the election, and Renaud's opponents – Geoffrey included – tried to arrest and imprison Marbod while he was en route to Angers.[41] What then followed was by all accounts a tumultuous election disrupted by a rowdy crowd. Renaud's party won the day, but Hildebert de Lavardin, then bishop of Le Mans, protested against the election in a letter to the archbishop of Tours and absented himself from the consecration.[42] Geoffrey had expressed deep disagreement with Renaud, but eventually made peace with his new bishop.[43] But sometime in the period 1116–1118 Geoffrey learned from a friend that Renaud had complained about his behaviour at the election. Geoffrey then did away with all diplomacy, resumed hostilities, and in a letter castigated Renaud at length for the way in which he had acceded to the episcopacy:

> Omnes utique contradixerunt illam, quam vestram fuisse dicitis, selectionem et reprobaverunt; nec immerito. Nam illis invitis et non petentibus arreptus fuistis a vulgo. Et quod ibi factum est, hoc praesumptuosa et pernitiosa fecit seditio … Nos autem, quae vidimus et audivimus, nec possumus nec debemus non loqui. In illa siquidem actione, imo vulgi conspiratione quam pro electione reputatis, lex velut inter arma siluit, vox divina locum non habuit. Totum ibi levitas vindicavit et vanitas, ubi mima quaedam et mulier publica, quae vos garruliter acclamabat, amplius potuit quam plebis maturitas, vel clericalis honestas potuerit.[44]
>
> [Everyone everywhere has spoken against that which you call your election and has reproached it. And not without reason. For against their will and without them asking, you were taken by the crowd, and what was achieved there was done by a presumptuous and pernicious sedition … For we who have seen and heard all this cannot nor should not remain silent. In this deed, or rather the conspiracy of the crowd, 'the laws were silent among arms', and there was no room for God's voice. Levity and vanity conquered all there, where a mime and prostitute garrulously [*garruliter*] acclaimed you. She achieved more than the maturity of the people, or the respectability [*honestas*] of the clergy could have.]

This quotation is merely a part of a long haranguing of someone Geoffrey sees as an annoying upstart, but it contains a fascinating detail. In countering the accusation of

[40]For an overview of Renaud's episcopate, see D. de Saint-Marthe, Congr. of St Maur, B. Hauréau (eds), *Gallia christiana: in provincias ecclesiasticas distributa*, 16 vols (Paris, 1856–1865), 14: 564–67. On Renaud's investiture by Fulk, see Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres*, ed. G. Giordanengo (Turnhout, 1996), 304. See also letter 134 in which he lays out his general objections to lay investiture to pope Paschal II.

[41]Marbod of Rennes, *Epistolae, Patrologia Latina*, *op. cit*., 171: 1465–72; Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*., 38–39. See B. Lemesle, 'L'integration politique des bourgeois d'Angers aux xi^{e} et xii^{e} siècles: entre stratégie et opportunité', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Oest: Anjou, Maine. Poitou-Charente, Touraine* 116: 4 (2009), 7–17, here 14.

[42]Hildebert de Lavardin, *Epistolae, Patrologia Latina*, *op. cit*., 171: 211a–c. Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*. 302.

[43]Geoffrey's attitudes to his new bishop can be seen in letters 9, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21 and 28 in Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*.

[44]Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*., 3002. The citation is from Cicero's *Pro Milone*; see A. Klotz (ed.), *Pro T. Annio Milone oratio* (Leipzig, 1918), 18.

being a nuisance, Geoffrey draws Renaud's mind to the fact that his entire election was due to the disruptive presence of a crowd, and that he had been acclaimed by a mime who was also a prostitute. Apart from the obviously negative connotations that prostitutes carried with them in the eyes of a monk, mimes had been seen negatively by church fathers (following classical Roman precedent) and later reformers wishing to maintain the purity of the clergy and separate them from popular forms of entertainment associated with the laity.[45] This woman, then, being a mixture of two disdained categories, comes to represent the farcical nature and lack of poor judgement in the election of Renaud. Hildebert's letter to the archbishop of Tours in 1101–1102 confirms that the proceedings had been disrupted by a crowd, but he does not mention the mime-prostitute, although unlike Geoffrey he was not an eyewitness himself but relied on reports from the election from the dean of the cathedral chapter.[46]

No explanation is given for Geoffrey's addition of the mime-prostitute – was she actually there and seen by Geoffrey; was she placed there by Fulk who wished to tease the (theoretically) celibate cathedral canons and 'reformists'; or was she the rhetorical invention of Geoffrey, or a projection of his general distaste onto a woman in the crowd, signalling the prostitution of the church, rendering the election an empty spectacle and the church the concubine of worldly powers? Whether or not the mime-prostitute was real, Geoffrey would certainly have seen her as indicative of the moral state of the church during the investiture controversy, as he argued in a letter to leading clerics after the election, encouraging them to resist the bishop-elect, saying that if they failed to do so, they 'have denied Christ, who is the truth, and have turned his Church – which should be altogether chaste and free – into the concubine and servant of the world, to the peril of your souls'.[47] Later on, in a letter to pope Paschal II dated to 1119, Geoffrey invokes the image of the *mulier publica* as what the church becomes if she is not 'chaste', that is, if she is corrupted – polluted – by gifts: 'and from being the chaste and virgin spouse of the Lord, she is seen as having truly become like a prostitute'.[48]

The levity and vanity of the crowd, placed in contrast to the maturity of the people gathered for the election and the respectability of the clergy, are further emphasised by the adverb *garruliter* 'garrulously', describing how the mime-prostitute acclaimed Renaud. With not only its sense of 'chatter' but also its transferred sense in classical literature of animal and inanimate sounds, it carries both a misogynistic connotation

[45]On clerical concerns regarding mimes and actors, see, for instance, A.F. Johnson, 'An introduction to medieval English theatre' in R. Beadle and A.J. Fletcher (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge, 2008), 1–25, here 2. On Roman perceptions of 'shameful' professions, see C. Edwards, 'Unspeakable professions: public performance and prostitution in ancient Rome' in J.P. Hallett and M.B. Skinner (eds), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1998), 66–95.

[46]Hildebert de Lavardin, *Epistolae, Patrologia Latina*, *op. cit*., 171: 210b–211a. 'Sed testantur qui adfuerunt quod ad juvenem infra sacros ordines et annos inventum, nec a clero electum, seditiosus turbatae turbae clamor pontificalem extorserit electionem. Asseruit etiam decanus cantorem, archidiaconos, et majorem capituli partem, quantum licuerit, obclamasse … '. ('But those who were present testify that the seditious clamour of a disturbed crowd obtained the election by force for a young boy found not to be in holy orders and of [appropriate] age. The dean asserted that the cantor, archdeacons and the majority of the chapter cried out in protest as much as possible.'

[47]Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*., 36 '[Quod si feceritis,] Christum qui est veritas, plane abnegastis, et aecclesiam suam, quae omnino casta debet esse et libera, saecularitatis concubinam et ancillam, cum periculo animarium vestrarum, constituistis.'

[48]Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Oeuvres, op. cit*. 406. 'et ex casta et virgine sponsa Domini quasi mulier publica veraciter facta dinoscatur' ('and [the Church] may be seen as having truly been turned from the chaste and virgin spouse of the Lord into a common woman, as it were').

here of women's 'empty chatter' and a sense of the vernacular literally breaking into the Latinate scene.[49] Whether or not the mime-prostitute was real, the event was seen through the disdaining eyes of a high cleric of 'reformist' inclinations and versed in classical literature as an event that was not only liturgically but also linguistically disruptive.[50]

Accounts of conflicts between religious orders and local powers could at time include interventions that utilised the disruptive power of female bodies. In 1108, Bertrand of Toulouse had regained control over Toulouse as its count, following a tumultuous decade. He had ruled the county since his father Raymond IV left on the First Crusade, but was soon usurped by his cousin Philippa and her husband William IX of Aquitaine. During this tumultuous period, he was keen to assert his authority in the county, and the abbey of Saint-Gilles between Nîmes and Camargue became the site of one such assertion. The abbey had been seen as the personal property of the counts during the eleventh century, and Bertrand's father Raymond, being known in charters as the count of Saint-Gilles ('Sancti Egidii comes') before succeeding his brother William as count of Toulouse, had taken a particular interest in it.[51]

Wishing to establish Saint-Gilles as his base while waiting to reclaim Toulouse, Bertrand began in 1105 to take property from the monastery and then escalated the matter further, in 1106, by (according to the monks complaining to pope Paschal II) having his men enter the monastery and plunder it, wounding monks and taking some of them as hostages and, to add insult to injury, placing prostitutes in the cells of the monks. The count had furthermore arranged for towers to be built next to the monastery to control it, thus challenging its lordship over the area (including the port-town growing around it) and altering its role and relation to its surrounding landscape.[52] Reports of this incursion provoked the intervention of pope Paschal II, who as the monastery's protector excommunicated Bertrand, later forcing him to retract his claims.[53]

Apart from its dynastic significance, the abbey of Saint-Gilles held the relics of the popular Saint Giles and was placed along the route to Compostela and thus a reliable source of income from pilgrims. The abbey tried fiercely to maintain its independence, however, against the counts of Toulouse, the bishops of Nîmes, and Cluny (Raymond IV and his mother Almodis had placed it under Cluny in 1066, under which it remained

[49]In the visitation of the diocese of Hereford in 1397, bishop John Trillek learned that a certain Margaret Northyn was a 'chatterer' (*garrulatrix*) in church. *The Visitation of Hereford Diocece in 1397*, ed. I. Forrest and C. Whittick, Canterbury and York Society, cxi (Woodbridge, 2021), 6–7.

[50]For all the irregularities of Renaud's election, Geoffrey's fears for how it would undermine the reformist agenda were unfounded as Renaud throughout his episcopal career, first at Angers and later as archbishop of Rheims, was supportive of reformist policies and the aim of the freedom of the church – *libertas ecclesiae*. See J.S. Ott, *Bishops, Authority and Community in Northwestern Europe, c.1050–1150* (Cambridge, 2015), 285–86. Lemesle, *op. cit*., 15 emphasises Renaud's reformist agenda and warns against seeing the disruption through the lens of the recurrent conflicts across Europe between burghers and cathedral authorities., *op. cit*, 15

[51]Raymond, being the second-born to count Pons and Almodis of Toulouse, initially inherited only part of his mother's dowry, in order to allow the first born, William, to retain as much land as possible. The dowry included the abbey of Saint-Gilles, a lay abbacy. On Raymond and his relation to Saint-Gilles, see T.W. Lecaque, 'The Count of Saint-Gilles and the Saints of the Apocalypse: Occitan piety and culture in the time of the first crusade' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, 2015), 21–33.

[52]É. Goiffon (ed.), *Bullaire de l'abbaye de Saint-Gilles* (Nîmes, 1882), 43.

[53]Bertrand would make one last attempt in 1107 before being able to take possession of Toulouse in 1108, thus no longer needing to pursue his claims in Saint-Gilles. A.G. Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic foundation legends in medieval southern France* (Ithaca, 1995), 233–34.

nominally but with a great deal of resistance).[54] The monastery's foundation legend has Saint Giles placing the monastery under direct papal control, later upheld by pope John VIII in a conflict with the bishop of Nîmes in 878. This legend was later seen through the lens of the increasing popularity of independent papal monasteries from the mid-eleventh century onwards under a more expansive and assertive papacy. A fabricated version of the basis of Pope John's privilege of exemption, a supposed discovery of his in the Roman archives, was inserted into the abbey's cartulary at some time around or prior to 1091, which asserted the monastery's liberty from all royal, episcopal, ducal and comital control. At stake here was primarily the freedom from the bishop of Nîmes, particularly in the matter of blessing a newly appointed abbot, which now became a papal prerogative although Urban II allowed the abbey to choose any bishop they wanted to perform the blessing.[55] Yet the privileges also protected the abbey from lay control, and were thus an important part of the monastery's attempt to wrest itself free from the control of the counts of Toulouse who claimed lordship over the town. Raymond IV appears to have renounced his claims in 1095 and again in 1096 before leaving on the first crusade.[56]

If we are to take the account of Bertrand's actions described in Paschal's letter at face value, brief as it is, it would at first appear to be just another violent intrusion of monastic rights and claims to independence. However, the mention of the use of prostitutes to fill the vacated cells does bring another dimension to the episode. On the one hand, replacing the bodies of the monks with those of prostitutes could be just a crude jibe by an assertive lord against supposedly sexually continent men, replacing the symbols of continence, holiness and *fuga mundi* with those of sexual incontinence, sin and worldliness. Yet one may perhaps also venture another explanation: the fierce insistence on monastic *libertas*, recognising no other authority than the distant papacy, was aimed not only at the bishops of Nîmes, but against secular lordship as well, a challenge to Bertrand's claim to be their legitimate overlord, and thus an act of infidelity. Replacing the monks with prostitutes would underscore that sense of a betrayed faith and the perceived dishonesty, disloyalty and unreliability of the abbey in that the monks had chosen another lord when they should have remained faithful to the dynasty so closely tied to the location.

This episode, in turn, is not too unlike Pierre des Vaux de Cernay's report of several misdeeds perpetrated by Raimon Roger, count of Foix, south of Toulouse, during the Albigensian crusade in the early thirteenth century. Among his reported sacrilegious acts was that he had entered the abbey of Saint-Antonin, to which Pamiers belonged, with mercenaries, actors and prostitutes (*ruptarii*, *mimi, meretrices*) and ordered the abbot to hand over its belongings to him. The abbot refused, which led Raimon Roger to lock up the canons in the abbey church for three days during which they could not even go outside to perform their needs. While the canons were locked up in the church, Raimon Roger allegedly had sex with the prostitutes in the infirmary. He thereafter expelled the

[54]On Saint-Gilles' relation to Cluny, see *Remensnyder, op. cit. ibid*., 236–43.
[55]*Remensnyder, op. cit. ibid*., 220–28. As subjected to Cluny, the abbots were picked by their superiors. Whether Saint-Gilles stood directly under papal control, or indirectly as subjects of Cluny, is left somewhat unclear. As Remensnyder points out, while the papacy seems to consider it a dependency of Cluny in some ways, the popes also seem to treat it as a papal possession in the privileges they granted the abbey: *ibid*., 237.
[56]*Remensnyder, op. cit. ibid*., 232.

canons all but naked to walk into Pamiers while a herald announced that they were not to be given shelter.[57]

The actions of the count can here be seen once again as a play at clerical anxieties regarding women and sex in the monastic precincts. The infirmary would not be a sacred space in the proper sense, discussed above, as an area consecrated by a bishop for divine service, but nevertheless constituted a part of a heavily regulated and gendered space which became defiled by the count's actions. Pierre's account of Raimon Roger is in general undoubtedly hostile. One of Raimon's sons, for instance, supposedly seized a canon while celebrating mass and cut him to pieces on the altar – a mockery of the division of the body of Christ in the eucharist.[58] Such accounts of extreme violence were, as Meghan Cassidy-Welch has argued, intended to

> build up and emphasise some of the key components of what made a legitimate and effective crusade for Pierre, the violence that the heretics and their supporters were doing to the land, to Christians, and to Christ, was ample justification for their annihilation [...].[59]

The sexual transgression of the count, both in bringing in prostitutes and other disreputable people and in his own sexual activity, can be seen as one such proof to demonstrate the count's disregard for all that was holy.

This account of the intrusion and humiliation of the canons of Pamiers shares a feature with that of the events taking place in Saint-Gilles about a century earlier: they were both challenges to monastic exercises of lordship, challenges that were symbolically enacted by emphasising the lack of sexual prowess and therefore a perceived lack of masculinity among celibate clergy (who developed their own models of masculinity).[60] Women were known to frequently exercise lordship (countess Adela of Blois being a prominent example), for instance during the minority of their sons or while their men were on crusade.[61] Womanhood did not preclude lordship, and female lords were just as capable as men of ordering violence or upholding lordship. Celibate men, on the other hand, while perhaps not constituting a 'third gender' as some have suggested, did hold an odd position in the eyes of members of the secular warrior class.[62] The celibate men were often perceived by their secular peers as effeminate or not fully masculine in their gender performance through their disavowal of sex and violence.[63] Thus, expelling the canons from their home and forcing them to go through their lordship naked and humiliated after having had sex with a prostitute in their monastery can be seen as at once

[57]Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay, *Historia Albigensium, Patrologia Latina*, *op. cit*., 213: 601c. The abbey had belonged to Cluny since 1060, but later became an Augustinian abbey in 1095.
[58]*ibid*, 601a.
[59]M.C. Welch, 'Images of blood in the *Historia Albigensis* of Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay', *Journal of Religious History*, 35, 4 (2011–2012), 478–91, here 488.
[60]On clerical masculinity, see: J. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical celibacy, masculinity and reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia, 2015); J. Thibodeaux (ed.), *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, monks and masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, 2010); R.M. Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of masculinity in late medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2003).
[61]Kimberley LoPrete, 'The gender of lordly women: the case of Adela of Blois' in C. Meek and C. Lawless (eds), *Pawns or Players? Studies on medieval and early modern women* (Dublin, 2003), 90–110.
[62]On clergy as a 'third gender', see R.N. Swanson, 'Angels incarnate: clergy and masculinity from Gregorian reform to Reformation' in D.M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Abingdon, 1999), 160–77.
[63]In fact, conventions around masculinity and sexual performance are one reason why clerical celibacy was so hard to implement universally for centuries after its adoption by the First Lateran Council in 1123. M. Armstrong-Partida, *Defiant Priests: Domestic unions, violence, and clerical masculinity in fourteenth-century Catalunya* (Ithaca, 2017). See also J.D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest*, *op. cit*.

an attack on their masculinity as well as their claims to lordship. In the case of the canons of Pamiers, this took place amid tensions between the count of Foix and the abbot of Pamiers. The two had exercised lordship over Pamiers, but with the abbot as overlord.[64] The relationship between the two presumably worsened after abbot Vitalis met with the leader of the Albigensian Crusade and Raimon Roger's enemy, Simon of Montfort, in Fanjeaux in 1209 to enter a *pariage* – an agreement on sharing power in the abbot's domain.[65] As in the case of Saint Giles, the use of prostitutes here, if we are to believe Pierre's account, can be a reprisal for a perceived slight from the abbot, offering himself and what is his to anyone.

At Saint-Gilles, likewise, the placement of prostitutes in the monks' cells emphasised not only the duplicity of the monks vis-à-vis Bertrand (as he would have seen it), but their failure to live up to standards of lordly masculinity. 'Could such "men" *really* be lords?' seems to be implied in these actions whereby men of the world assert themselves and highlight the sexual inactivity of their enemies, symbolically emasculating the already emasculated. As Jennifer Thibodeaux points out, however, monks had similar sentiments regarding secular men: 'From the perspective of the celibate monk, the knight suffered from a lack of self-control and possibly effeminacy by giving in to the lustful advances of women'.[66]

The elite status of monks, especially in the reformed orders, could also lead to competition with members of the secular clergy that once more made use of women to target not only the purity of monastic sacred space, but also that of its inhabitants. An example of this can be found in the events surrounding the foundation of the Cistercian monastery of Varnhem in Sweden.

The establishment of new, 'reform-minded' orders could be a highly disruptive event for local communities and their identities. The Cistercians often had a desire that their new foundations be set up 'in the wilderness' – a remnant of the eremitical movement of the eleventh century – although the wilderness was somewhat artificial, as patrons would vacate areas of inhabitants before the Cistercians moved in.[67] In the case of Varnhem, the monastery was founded next to an existing settlement on land donated by a lady Sigrid in c.1150. The monks came from Alvastra Abbey, which had been founded in 1143 by monks sent out from Clairvaux by Bernard himself. The monastery was built to the west of the existing settlement and some 250 metres north-west of an existing stone church (previously serving the manor) that was appropriated by the monks. At the end of the twelfth century, the stone church had likely been converted for non-religious use, as it no longer served any need after the abbey church had taken over its function.[68] Upon Sigrid's death a few years after the donation, her relative, Queen Christina, made

[64]On the conflict between the two, see Pierre des Vaux-des-Cernay, *op. cit*., 575d–c. See also G.-M. de Llobet, 'Pamiers au début du XIII^{e} siècle' in *Vaudois languedocien et Pauvres catholiques, Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 2 (1969), 195–204, especially 197–200.

[65]De Llobet, *op. cit*., 198.

[66]J.D. Thibodeaux, 'Introduction: rethinking the medieval clergy and masculinity' in J.D. Thibodeaux (ed.), *Negotiating Clerical Masculinities*, *op. cit*., 1–15, at 7.

[67]G. Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), 218. On the emergence of the new orders from the eremitical movement, see H. Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A study of religious communities in western Europe, 1000–1150* (London, 1984).

[68]On the settlements in and around Varnhem, see M. Vretemark, 'Fru Sigrids gård i Varnhem' in O. Karsvall and K. Jupiter (eds), *Medeltida storgårdar: 15 uppsatser om ett tvärvetenskapligt forskningsproblem, Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi* 131 (Uppsala, 2014), 131–43.

a claim to the land, and thus entered into a dispute with the monks over the rights to the land upon which their newly founded monastery stood. It appears that locals were holding a grudge against the new monastery and took this opportunity to get back at the monks. Women were reported to have entered the grounds of the monastery and defecated there. Furthermore, the parish priest nearby (presumably of the little manor church) appears to have enrolled these women in a liturgically charged protest action directed at the monks. On Palm Sunday, the women had gathered at the priest's house where they disrobed and thus, dressed only in their linens, entered the monastery and danced before the monks as they walked in procession through the cloister. While the monks were detained by this striptease, the parish priest rushed to celebrate Palm Sunday in his own church before the monks could do theirs, probably as an act of symbolically asserting himself over the otherwise dominating monastery. While the priest celebrated mass, his house burned down, by divine intervention, along with all the clothes the ladies had left there, the legend tells us.[69]

What we see here, then – briefly and couched in accounts of divine interventions – is a case of the tensions that emerge when land changes hands and a new religious force supersedes established local forms and patterns of religious life, as well as how both clerics and laity take part in resisting the new lords. The protest was partially successful: the majority of the monks moved to Denmark where they set up the Abbey of Vitskøl, leaving a small cohort in Varnhem until the conflict over the property had blown over, whereupon the monastery was repopulated.[70]

Notions of sexuality, masculinity and purity can thus be seen as closely interwoven with the practices pertaining to sacred space in the above narratives. The deployment of 'impure' or dissolute women in sacred space, and at times engagement in sexual intercourse, can be interpreted as striking against perceived duplicity and deficient masculinity of a celibate clergy, as well as the notion of *libertas ecclesiae*, the rallying cry of eleventh- and twelfth-century reformers combatting simony, clerical marriage and concubinage. Celibacy and renunciation of 'the world' was at the core of monastic and wider ecclesiastical notions of freedom. However, in the above accounts, the world in its most sexualised and, for a celibate man, its most threatening aspects instead broke through the barriers raised against the temptations of the world to poke fun at and to undermine the elevated status that such seclusion brought.

Loose women

The examples we have encountered thus far have been a rather mixed bag: some are cases of when women use their bodies to challenge exclusionary policies as well as monastic privilege, but others are decidedly more troubling, involving the instrumentalisation of women's bodies as pawns in various power games. The men in these cases have ranged from allies to sexual predators. Female bodies, and the risk of pollution and disturbance to gendered ritual space that they carried with them, were clearly an ample threat to both

[69]M.C. Gertz (ed.), *De fundatione monasterii Vitaescholae, in Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevii*, 2 vols (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1917–22), 2: 139.
[70]*ibid*., 139.

occupy the minds of clerical authors and serve as a means to challenge the various constellations of power and privilege that sacred space embodied.

In the above narratives, 'loose' women – in particular prostitutes (*meretrices*) – are presented or imagined as performing or participating in disruptive and at times almost carnivalesque intrusions into the ordered but precarious sacred space. Their presence is threatening, or imagined as such, because of their marginality arising from their choice to break out from their spatial confinement (home, monastery or brothel). As Barbara Hanawalt has argued, women become 'marginal' when they break out of spatial and social confinement, and thus constitute (following Mary Douglas's study of purity and danger) a potential danger and pollution. Thus, '[w]omen stepping outside physical boundaries and becoming transients … connoted a moral lapse in itself'.[71] Prostitutes and brothels were accepted as a necessary evil, to – according to contemporary sexual psychology – provide an outlet for men's sexuality lest their pent-up sexual energy be released through rape or sodomy.[72] But a prostitute entering a church in any other fashion than as a penitent, for instance like the mime-prostitute of Geoffrey of Vendôme's account, would be unacceptable.

These women are disruptive not only through their marginality, however, but also by the fact that they led lives that from a clerical point of view were 'unscripted', that followed a separate set of rules and moralities which rendered their presence unpredictable – diametrically opposed to the confined and scripted behaviour expected from, for instance, liturgical commentators. Prostitutes were openly non-compliant with sexual mores and the association of these women, living by their own 'rule', with brigands, mimes and mercenaries indicates that they were seen as having neither a fixed place (as a good parishioner would have) nor loyalty. This 'unscripted' behaviour of displaced, unruly and polluting female bodies is perhaps most clearly on display in the direct action taken by the women at Varnhem. Their intervention involved a juxtaposition of the right-ordered liturgical movement of chaste monks through the sacred space of the cloister with the dissolute dancing of half-naked women teasing them sexually. Although liturgical dance (performed by men in orders) had existed, the notion of laypeople and in particular women dancing in sacred space was usually seen as a threat to the right order of such a space. As Lynneth Miller Renberg writes on dance in sacred space in later times: 'the disruption caused by dance in sacred spaces upset societal boundaries between the sacred and the secular and endangered the priest's authority through drowning out his voice and teachings, both symbolically and literally'.[73] The eleventh-century legend of the cursed carollers (a group of laypeople who were cursed to forever continue to dance because they refused to stop their carolling in a churchyard when it disturbed the priest) was for instance a recurrent example in moralising texts about the impropriety and sacrilege involved in dancing.[74] Later, in 1151, the *vita* of St Wilhelm of Æbelholt (1125–1203) describes the saintly abbot being called in to reform a house of canons at Eskilsø, Denmark, who regularly invited family to dine and dance

[71] B. Hanawalt, *Of Ill and Good Repute: Gender and social control in medieval England* (Oxford, 1998), 73. See Douglas, *op. cit*. Hanawalt's argument forms a critique and development of Bronislaw Geremek's notion of marginality, which puts too narrow an economic focus on who counted as marginal; see B. Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1987).
[72] See, for instance, R.M. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and sexuality in medieval England* (New York, 1996), 32–33.
[73] L. Miller Renberg, *Women, Dance and Parish Religion in England, 1300–1640* (Woodbridge, 2022), 57.
[74] *ibid*., 51–75. See also *Handlyng Synne*, *op. cit*., 283–90.

with them in the monastery on feast days.[75] Conversion and the restoration of the *regula* also meant regulating bodies and their movements – a recurrent theme in high medieval religious culture.[76] For a band of monks sent out by Bernard of Clairvaux himself, the action was threatening beyond the immediate shock of half-naked dancing women. A few of them may even have remembered or read the homily by Bernard on the feast of the dedication of the abbatial church of Clairvaux, in which he lays out his vision of what constitutes a sacred space:

> Quid enim lapides isti potuerunt sanctitatis habere ut eorum solemnia celebremus? Habent utique sanctitatem, sed propter corpora vestra. An vero corpora vestra sancta esse quis dubitet, quae templum Spiritus Sancti sunt, 'ut sciat unusquisque possidere vas suum in sanctificatione'? Itaque sanctae sunt animae 'propter inhabitantem Spiritum Dei in vobis', sancta sunt corpora propter animas, sancta est etiam propter corpora domus.[77]
>
> [What holiness could these stones have so that we celebrate their solemnity? They have sanctity indeed, but because of your bodies. But who would doubt that your bodies – that are the temple of the holy Spirit – are sanctified, so 'that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification'? Your souls are therefore holy 'because of the Spirit of God that dwells in you', your bodies are holy because of your souls, this house is also holy because of your bodies.]

Bernard here draws on the eremitical tradition from which the Cistercian order stemmed (and a sentiment that immigrant Burgundian Cistercians would have recognised in Sweden) rather than what canonists and liturgists would consider the proper constitution of sacred space through consecration by a bishop. Sanctified souls make holy bodies that in turn sanctify space, and not the other way around. We have here, then, a tale of two bodies: one disciplined, chaste and sanctified from within, and one unruly, unchaste and unsanctified, threatening pollution and disorder. Sexual teasing and inordinate bodies disrupting the divinely ordered Palm Sunday procession would thus have been perceived as striking at the very root of the sanctity of a precariously established sacred space in a distant land.

Lay and female transgression in episcopal registers and visitation records

If the reports discussed thus far are somewhat ambiguous, we are on firmer ground when it comes to the episcopal registers from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards. Following the fourth Lateran council in 1215, bishops were expected to conduct regular visitations, the records of which remain to some extent, and they began to keep registers over their administration. This kind of material is generally well detailed and well preserved in England, with several modern indexed editions of registers, whereas the continental equivalents are rather scarce. These documents, while certainly often carrying the individual imprint of the bishop in charge, tend to rely on multiple and trusted

[75] M.C. Gertz (ed.), *Sancti Wilhelmi abbatis vita et miracula*, in *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1908–12), 320.

[76] See, for instance, C.S. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral schools and social ideals in medieval Europe, 950–1200* (Philadelphia, 1994), especially chapters 9 and 10, which contrast Hugh of St Victor's and Bernard of Clairvaux's view of the regulation of bodies: for Hugh, external regulation led to an inner change, whereas for Bernard, the reverse applied.

[77] Bernard of Clairvaux, *In dedicatione ecclesiae sermo I*, in J. Leclercq, C.T. Talbot and H. Rochais (eds), *S. Bernardi Opera*, 9 vols (Rome, 1957–1977), 5: 370–71. See 1 Thess. 4:4. (NKJV). 1 Cor. 3:16.

witnesses.[78] Through these sources we get a more detailed insight into parish life and everyday forms of transgression, particularly of women entering the choir or chancel, alone or in the company of men.

The pastoral programme of the thirteenth century involved both the development of the church's means of oversight and control, and the deepened involvement of the laity in church activities. The laity were generally meant to be responsible for the upkeep of the nave of their parish church and engaged in various fundraising activities: wealthy patrons founded chapels and paid for chantries, guilds took great care to adorn churches and a wave of new forms of lay piety energised the church.[79] The economic and material involvement of the laity in the management of their church likely created a setting wherein they may have felt greater entitlement to their sacred spaces, especially among women, who frequently assisted the clergy in the maintenance and decorations of the church, and appear to have been more active there than men.[80] Conflicts between local elites and the church emerged where elites held (or claimed to hold) advowson (the right to present candidates for a benefice to the bishop), which could lead to bitter conflicts, with parishioners barricading themselves in their church to prevent the bishop's men from installing a new priest.[81] Yet the nature of the conflicts in these sources from the mid-thirteenth century onwards is of a rather different character compared to the earlier sources. While we do see various interventions of a symbolic, violent and spectacular nature (for instance, snatching candles and letters from the priest's hands while he was excommunicating parishioners), the registers do not show evidence of the kinds of intervention involving women's bodies that we have seen thus far.[82] Proper behaviour in church, the avoidance of flirtation and the importance of quite literally knowing one's place are central themes in this form of ecclesial governmentality. We thus see both a cultural shift and a new kind of source material that is decidedly more sober than earlier monastic and reformist sources, and concerned with the behaviour of ordinary parishioners. The beliefs and the behaviour of the laity here take on a more prominent role in this cultural shift and our new sources offer us an insight into the everyday religious practices in parishes that we do not have to the same extent regarding religious life in previous centuries. This can function as a complement to the previous sources, but it is also a testament to lay practices and forms of piety that disregarded the boundaries that bishops sought to police. As Dyan Elliott notes, the high and late Middle Ages saw a turn away from notions of certain bodies as pollutive *per se*. What instead becomes central is the question of *intention* to pollute.[83] Guillaume Durant argues, for instance, that only

[78]See, for instance, I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, *op. cit*., and I. Forrest, 'Trust and doubt: the late medieval bishop and local knowledge', *Studies in Church History*, 52 (2016), 164–85; I. Forrest, 'The archive of the official of Stow and the machinery of church government in the late thirteenth century', *Historical Research*, 84, 223 (2011), 1–13.

[79]See, for instance: A. Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, 1993); M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991); G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250–1550* (Oxford, 2015); G. Rosser, 'Parochial conformity and voluntary religion in late-medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1 (1991), 173–89; N. Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England* (New Haven, 2021).

[80]On the role of women in late-medieval parish life, see, for instance, K. French, *The Good Women of the Parish: Gender and religion after the Black Death* (Philadelphia, 2008). On the parish and its role in creating communities, see S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1997), 79–100.

[81]For a case study of an extreme case of such conflicts, see A.G. Miller, *Patronage, Power, and Masculinity in Medieval England: A microhistory of a bishop's and knight's contest over the church of Thame* (Abingdon, 2023).

[82]The interrupted excommunication is recorded in *The Rolls and Register of Bishop Oliver Sutton, 1280–1299*, ed. R.M.T. Hill, 8 vols (Hereford, 1948–1975), 4: 35–36.

[83]Elliott, *op. cit*., 6, 61–80.

blood and semen wilfully shed polluted a site, whereas menstrual blood, haemorrhoids, blood shed from accidents and semen from unintended nocturnal ejaculations would not pollute it.[84] What stands out among these sources is the absence of spectacular interventions of the kind we have encountered thus far. Pollution remains a concern as cemeteries were frequently polluted by bloodshed during brawls or occupations of churches, and occasionally by the improper burial of an impure body (an excommunicate or heretic, for example).[85] Symbolically charged violence or other forms of direct action were still common, but no episcopal election or other ceremony is described in the registers as being disrupted by a crowd led by a mime-prostitute, and monasteries were largely spared from dancing and defaecating women. Occasionally, one finds evidence of sex occurring in churches, but here the church is not being actively targeted but seems to be used instead out of convenience.[86] More pervasive, instead, are lay men and women appropriating sacred space for themselves in various acts of piety and resistance. In a way, we can speak here with Michel de Certeau in contrasting the multiform 'practice of everyday life' that resisted and transcended the spatial limits imposed and policed from above.[87]

The register of Eudes Rigaud, archbishop of Rouen 1248–1275, is among the earliest registers of visitations, beginning in 1248, and provides a rich and valuable insight into the complexities of local religious life and how it collided with the vision of a reforming bishop.[88] There is some evidence in Rigaud's register that men and women took an active part in liturgical celebrations, for instance leading processions. At St-Martin-de-Pontoise, men and women walked into the cloister in procession every Sunday, and at the nunnery of Saint Saëns, a nun was found to have assisted the priest during mass.[89] A similar instance can be gleaned indirectly in a synodal statute from Carcassonne, c.1270 in which women, even if they happen to be nuns, are prohibited from assisting the priest at mass.[90]

Elsewhere in Rigaud's register, it appears that women were being granted access to the choir and that laypeople in general were allowed to linger in the choir during the divine office to have access to relics.[91] Lay passage through the choir and chancel up to the relics was something that greatly disturbed Rigaud at various instances, mainly because it violated the principle of separation between laity and clergy, but also because it threatened to disturb clergy during prayers (and rule-abiding clergy could complain about this

[84]Durant, *Rationale, op. cit.*, i. vi. 38–46.
[85]See, for instance, M. Vivas, *Ni larmes ni sépulture: Privation de sépulture et inhumation infamante dans la province ecclésiastique de Bordeaux (fin XI^e–XVI^e s.)* (Bordeaux, 2023).
[86]Thus, the church of St Martin in the diocese of Salisbury was considered polluted after a man named Robert Michael had intercourse with a prostitute there, although masses had continued without the required ritual reconciliation of the site, a visitation in 1391 found. T.C.B. Timmins (ed.), *The Register of John Waltham*, Canterbury and York Society 80 (Woodbridge, 1994), 127.
[87]See de Certeau, *op. cit.*, in particular ch. 7, 'Walking in the City', 91–110.
[88]On Rigaud and his pastoral project, see A.J. Davis, *The Holy Bureaucrat: Eudes Rigaud and religious reform in thirteenth-century Normandy* (Ithaca, 2006).
[89]T. Bonnin (ed.), *Regestrum visitationum archiepiscopi rothomagenis* (Rouen, 1852), 41, 187. The translator and editor of the register believe various forms of lay participation were remnants of earlier liturgical practices. *The Register of Eudes of Rouen translated by Sydney M. Brown: edited with an introduction, notes, and appendix by Jeremiah F. O'Sullivan* (New York, 1964), 44, n. 22.
[90]*Les status synodaux*, Carcassonne XI.6: 'Hoc idem dicimus de mulieribus adjungentes quod nulla, quamvis sanctimonialis presumat presbyteri, dum celebrat, ministrare.' ('We say the same regarding women, adding that no woman, even if she is a nun, may presume to minister to a priest while he celebrates mass.')
[91]Bonnin, *op. cit.*, 472.

to the bishop), wherefore he often ordered the relics to be moved outside of the chancel.[92] In one instance that concerns lay transgression in general and not female transgression in particular, we get a sense of what may have been at stake, motivating clergy to allow lay access to the choir. During the visitation of the Victorine canons at the abbey of Eu, Rigaud fell into a debate with the canons about the best procedure to close off the choir from lay passage. The canons argued that if the passages to the relics, running through the choir, were closed, 'it would cause great damage, particularly concerning the relics' ('dicebant quod dampnum non modicum incurrerent, precipue ad reliquias').[93] The phrasing here suggests that being able to pass through the choir to the relics by the high altar would bring greater economic revenue than if the entrance were closed. The relics in question were those of Laurence O'Toole (Ir: Lorcán Ua Tuathail, 1128–1180), archbishop of Dublin 1162–1180, who died at the abbey and was canonised in 1225.[94] Due to the influx of pilgrims soon after his death, a new church had to be constructed to accommodate them and their needs, and it is likely this arrangement that clashed with Rigaud's desire for the laity to be kept completely outside of the choir and chancel. In other cases, Rigaud instructed that the relics be moved elsewhere for ease of access, indicating that the problem was first and foremost laypeople in the choir rather than their access to relics.[95] At other times, rule-abiding clerics complained to the archbishop of women intruding in the choir and chancel during their services, greatly impeding their obligations.[96]

The same practices of allowing laypeople to be in the choir or approach the altar that so angered Eudes Rigaud can be found in several English bishops' registers. At the Benedictine priory of Totnes, for instance, women and men were allowed into the choir, a visitation in 1348 found, and in 1405 the dean of Salisbury Cathedral, John Chandler, found at a visitation in the parish of Lyme that women were free to approach the altar 'for want of prohibition by the vicar'.[97]

Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln 1405–1419, outlined in a letter dated 26 May 1416 some of the rationales behind the separation of clergy and laypeople. The sacred authority of the canons, he argues, prohibits anyone apart from those duly appointed (that is, the clergy) to enter and sit in the chancels of churches to read or sing the divine office and permits no one else to claim such a seat for themselves:

> . . . presertim cum cancelli pro proximioribus Christi ministris et ecclesie pro reliquo populo ab ecclesia deputentur nec enim decens est ut dum exhibentur domino famulatus inter proximiores dei ministros et populum loci distribuatur paritas cum ordo sit diversis et de recto ordine racionis quilibet iuris sui limitibus debeat contentari.[98]
>
> [. . . especially because the chancels are assigned by the Church to the ministers closer to Christ and the churches for the rest of the people, and it is indeed not fitting that, while service is rendered to the Lord, equal place is distributed between the ministers closer to God

[92] *ibid*., 137, 306, 432, 472.
[93] *ibid*., 453.
[94] On St Laurence, see A.B. Tyrell, 'In search of St. Laurence O'Toole 1128–1180', *Dublin Historical Record*, 35, 3 (1982), 82–94.
[95] Bonnin, *op. cit*., 137, 306.
[96] *ibid*., 344.
[97] F.C. Hingeston-Randolph (ed.), *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1327–1369)* 3 vols (London, 1894–97), 2: 1074; T.C.B. Timmins (ed.), *The Register of John Chandler Dean of Salisbury 1404–17* (Devizes, 1984), 12.
[98] M. Archer (ed.), *The Register of Bishop Philip Repingdon, 1405–1419*, 3 vols (Hereford, 1963–1982), 3: 138.

> and the people because there is an order [of service] for different [groups] and by right order of reason each and every one ought to be content remaining within their place according to their canonical status.

In Towcester in Northamptonshire, however, Repingdon notes that a group of lay men and women were reported to frequently leave their designated area in the nave, walk into the chancel – the area reserved for the clergy to carry out their service in peace – and sit in the priests' seats.[99] Such actions, the bishop argued, were 'subversive of the due order of the house of God and a great hindrance to the worship in it' ('in subversionem debiti ordinis domus dei et cultus eiusdem non modicum impedimentum').[100] In this group there appears a certain Joan, wife of Lawrence Mortimer, who is singled out by the bishop. In spite of admonitions and warnings from the bishop, she kept walking into the choir and appropriated for herself a chair reserved for the priest. In spite of frequent citations to appear before the bishop, she refused, and there her brief story appears to end.[101]

A similar phenomenon can be seen in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, where Katherine Proud and Margaret Markaunt are noted in 1463 as refusing to stay in their seats in the nave among their peers, but instead as standing on their knees in the choir, by the priest.[102] In the same year and also at Wisbech, the unnamed wife of Robert Salt is recorded as sitting in the chancel of St John's, thereby disturbing fellow parishioners in their devotions.[103] It is not clear whether these two cases took place in the same church or in different locations, and whether the women formed an informal pious lay group – perhaps like that apparently led by Joan Mortimer. The presence of the priest during Katherine and Margaret's prostrations in the choir may be an indication that they did so during mass or during the divine office, whereas the records regarding the unnamed transgressor are less clear on the context – she could simply have sat in the choir, close to the tabernacle, during daytime while other townspeople came in to say their prayers. Ian Forrest suggests that Katherine and Margaret may in fact have played a liturgical role, as the manuscript describes them as kneeling *behind* the priest (as a deacon and subdeacon would).[104] As we have seen above, this would not be the first time, as both Eudes Rigaud and French synodal statutes bear testimony to women playing liturgical roles, but these women would be nuns. In Wisbech, however, neither Katherine nor Margaret are described as nuns, but rather as parish lay women.

The bishop's reprimands in the above cases concern not only crossing significant boundaries, but also the disturbance caused to the performance of the divine office and the devotions of other laypeople. Some people were apparently disturbed and reported the Wisbech incident to the bishop, but not every claim by the bishop that the presence of laypeople caused disturbance should be taken at face value. We saw a similar objection to the presence of laypeople in the choir in Rigaud's register regarding the access people had

[99] *ibid*., 3: 139.
[100] *ibid*., 3: 138.
[101] *ibid*., 3: 138–39, 155, 187–88.
[102] L.R. Poos (ed.), *Lower Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction in Late-Medieval England: The courts of the dean and chapter of Lincoln, 1336–1349 and the deanery of Wisbech, 1458–1484* (Oxford, 2001), 405–06.
[103] Poos, *op. cit*., 400.
[104] I. Forrest, *Gender and Authority in the Medieval Church: A new history* (Ithaca, 2025), ch. 5. Poos' transcription has them standing 'close' to the priest, but as Forrest's examination of the manuscript shows, this is incorrect. I am grateful to Prof. Forrest for relaying his findings in his upcoming book to me in conversation. See Poos, *op. cit*., 405–06.

through the choir to the relics of St Laurence. There, it was clear that it was the archbishop who was concerned about disturbance to the prayers, whereas the canons themselves did not seem too bothered when it was weighted against the economic benefits of allowing the laity access. Clearly, some people found these transgressions disturbing enough to report them to the bishop or his representatives during visitations. Katherine French has argued that the clergy themselves may have been rather relaxed about lay women in the chancel, perhaps because women undertook important work in the upkeep of the church while their men were working.[105] Women certainly played an important role in the day-to-day management of the church, which could also serve as a moment for the clergy to deepen the faith of their parishioners – why then not also invite them to participate in the divine office? Such 'pastoral outreach' can of course go too far at times. Looking back to Rigaud's register, we find it replete with complaints of monks and canons inviting laypeople in to wine and dine with them.

The reasons for the women and men being invited for drinks and dinners in spaces otherwise reserved for men, while never stated, could arguably vary from a simple act of friendship to alliance-making or smoothing over tensions between monks and burgers otherwise so common in monastic boroughs. Local guilds, benefactors of the monastery, as well as various forms of religious associations such as confraternities, are all groups that for both pastoral and strategic reasons could be invited to the refectory and choir.[106] For monastic leaders, who from the thirteenth century onwards in particular felt the pressure from increasingly assertive communes claiming their rights and independence from monastic lordship, maintaining good relations with their communities may have seemed a good strategy.[107] The female burghers who snuck into the monastery at Saint-Lô appear not to have done so with the abbot's permission, but the identification of their status as burghers by Rigaud is indicative of affinities based on class and status. For all the normative statements regarding monastic seclusion and *fuga mundi*, monasteries did not exist in a vacuum; rather, they constantly had to negotiate their role within the wider society and serve its spiritual needs, from which friendships and loyalties would arise.

In addition to the registers, the late Middle Ages provides us with laypeople's accounts of their forms of piety. These testify to the new and fervent forms of lay piety that developed, and which appear to have given women the confidence to disregard conventions. Friendship, and the desire to help a friend with one's prayers and to visit their grave when they had passed, could lead laypeople to cross the boundaries of convention on their own initiative. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery relates that when she learns of the death of her confessor, the saintly Richard Caister, she left for Norwich and St Stephen's church where he had served. There, she first stopped at the churchyard to weep, then she 'went forth wepyng into the chirche to the hy awter, and ther sche fel down with boistows sobbyngys, wepyngys, and lowde cryes besyden the grave of the good vicary' ('[she] went on, weeping, into the church to the high altar, [. . .] there she fell down

[105]French, *op. cit*., 90–91.

[106]For examples of interactions between monasteries and supporting lay groups, see A.-J.A. Bijstervelt, 'Looking for common ground: from monastic *fraternitas* to lay confraternity in the southern Low Countries in the tenth to twelfth centuries' in E. Jamroziak and J. Burton (eds), *Religious and Laity in Western Europe, 1000–1400: Interaction, negotiation, and power* (Turnhout, 2007), 287–314.

[107]On the conflicts between emerging communes and monastic boroughs, see: N.M. Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs: A study in medieval history* (Columbia, 1927); D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A history of its development from the times of St Dunstan to the fourth Lateran council, 940–1216*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1956), 2: 264–72.

with violent sobs, weeping, and loud cries beside the grave of the good vicar').[108] Similarly, when one of her associates and confidants Master Alan fell ill, she rushed into the choir of Saint Margaret's and knelt before the tabernacle to pray for him.[109]

Disturbance could also come from being too loud in one's devotions in sacred space.[110] This problem is a well-known motif in Margery's *Book*, where she is described as accustomed to receive the eucharist in the monks' chapel of St Margaret's Priory in King's Lynn, a Benedictine priory, with the approval of its prior. When a new monk arrived, who disliked Margery, the prior hastened to suspend the practice as the newcomer had said he refused to be in the chapel as long as Margery was there. Margery's confessor, Robert Springold, presented the dispensation Margery had received from Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, ordering them to hear her confession and administer the eucharist whenever she asked (but was unlikely to have allowed her to access the high altar as described above).[111] She then received the eucharist at the high altar of St Margaret's church:

> and owr Lord visited hir wyth so gret grace whan sche schulde ben howselyd that sche cryed so lowde that it myth ben herd al abowte the chirche and owte of the chirche as sche schulde a deyid therwyth that sche myth not receyvyn the sacrament of the prestys handys, the preyst turnyng hym ageyn to the awter wyth the preciows sacrament, til hir crying was cesyd.[112]
>
> [and our Lord visited her with such great grace when she should take communion that she cried so loudly that it could be heard all around the church and outside the church, as if she should have died from it, so that she could not receive the sacrament from the priest's hands, the priest turning back to the altar with the precious sacrament, until her crying had ceased.][113]

This moment, Virginia Chieffo Raguin argues, is Margery's claim to even higher authority for her right to be there – the authority of God himself.[114] Thus, although Margery acts with the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury, she is clearly seen as disruptive, and, as Raguin further notes, she inserts herself between parishioners and the entire setup of devotional images in the choir.[115] These elements – Margery's loud crying and the visual impairment caused by her physical presence, when visual space was restricted due to the rood screen – and the resistance she met with give us a sense of how laypeople performing their devotions in the choir elsewhere may have been perceived as disruptive both through sound and through their bodily presence. Margery is being disruptive by being bodily, spatially and acoustically 'out of place'. There is nothing necessarily wrong in praying in a loud and emotionally charged way; only not there and then in a way that

[108]L. Staley (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1996), ch. 60, l. 3477–79. Translation taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe: A new translation by Anthony Bale* (Oxford, 2015), 133.
[109]Staley (ed.), *op. cit*., ch. 70, l. 4013–30.
[110]On sonic disruptions of sacred space, and in particular homilies, see L.B. Baker, 'The sound of sin: episcopal noise regulation in the Later Middle Ages', *Viator* 52, 2 (2021), 131–78, here 162–63, and B.M. Kienzle, 'Medieval sermons and their performance: theory and record' in C.A. Muessig (ed.), *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2002), 87–124, here 120–21.
[111]Staley (ed.), *op. cit*., ch. 57, l. 3282–94.
[112]*ibid*., ch. 57, l. 3294–3298.
[113]Bale, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 127.
[114]V. Chieffo Raguin, 'Real and imagined bodies in architectural space: the setting for Margery Kempe's *Book*' in Raguin and Stanbury (eds), *op. cit*., 123.
[115]*Raguin, op. cit. ibid*., 123.

prevents reception of the eucharist and disturbs churchgoers and prevents them from perceiving the holy images.[116]

Conclusion

Medieval sacred space was precarious. It was a site for worship and the expression of local religious cultures that embodied and expressed a gendered order, endowing it with divine legitimacy. Yet this order could be rejected, and it was as all times vulnerable to pollution, disorder and transgression. Women's bodies out of place epitomised this fear.

Drawing on norms from the primitive church and patristic era, the reform movements of the central Middle Ages functioned as a crucible in which anxieties regarding lay and female bodies gained new relevance and urgency in defining and delimiting the sacred. In this context, the – real or imagined – presence of transgressive and marginal women such as mimes and prostitutes represented challenges to a gendered order expressed and sanctioned through sacred space. Challenges to reformists, to monastic lordship, ecclesiastical independence and the establishment of monasteries saw the utilisation of women's bodies as disruptive elements against sacred space.

From the point of view of reformists and bishops, sacred space was an expression of divine order, but one under threat from forces of disorder and pollution, epitomised in the female body – transgressive, marginal and unbound. Whether dancing in monastic precincts or merely seeking closer proximity to the holiest of spaces, medieval women posed a challenge to the gendered order of sacred space. Although there is a world of difference between, on the one hand, the dancing and defaecating ladies of Varnhem or the mime-prostitute in Angers, and, on the other hand, the women we encounter in the late Middle Ages sneaking into the choir to pray, they were all alarming to those tasked with maintaining order.

While the nature of these reported transgressions changes as we move into the thirteenth century, from the theatrical to the (usually) more discreet, we also see a shift in source material from anecdotal, legendary and rhetorically saturated accounts to administrative documents based on corroborating testimonies. We are left, then, with an epistemological problem: to what extent were the reports of women transgressing or imposing on sacred space rhetorical exaggerations? These sources are of varying credibility and ultimately impossible to verify. Yet as testimonies to a *mentalité*, the earlier source material in this article reveals the anxieties surrounding sacred space, the threat of women's bodies to it, and how these bodies could conceivably be utilised strategically against sacred space, with all their pollutive and disruptive force, as prostitutes, mimes or dancing and defaecating women entered prohibited areas.

What several of the examples outlined in this article also tell us is that disruptions of sacred space and its gendering are not necessarily a simple story of men against women or laity versus clergy. Rather, many of these accounts tell of how priests sided with the people they were set to serve and let women enter the sacred precincts, and sacred space coded as exclusively masculine could be

[116]For a discussion of 'noise' as 'sound out of place' following Peter Bailey's adaptation of Mary Douglas's discussion of purity and attempts to regulate it, see Baker, 'Sound of sin', *op. cit*., and P. Bailey, 'Breaking the sound barrier: a historian listens to noise', *Body and Society*, 2 (1996), 49–66, here 50–51.

targeted by clerics such as Robert of Arbrissel who, together with his female companions, challenged what was perceived as an unjust and unbiblical form of exclusion. One can only speculate on why clerics would ally themselves with their female parishioners, but social proximity, pastoral concern, a desire to reward female labour in the parish as well as economic needs may have led clerics to ignore the guidelines of their superiors. In the case of the transgressions recorded in Eudes Rigaud's register, some cases may reflect vestiges of earlier liturgical practices, but it is unlikely that the parish clergy we encounter in the late medieval English registers were unaware of the ban on laypeople and in particular women in the choir and chancels.

The special and protected status of sacred space did not mean that it was disassociated from worldly concerns and conflicts – far from it. As a site where ideals and norms regarding gender were encoded, it housed social contestations that either challenged such divisions, or drew from the gendering of sacred space to attack ecclesiastical independence or clerical masculinity and lordship. Medieval sacred space was thus not only precarious, but riddled with social tensions and conflicts under its serene surface, ready to burst into the open at any moment.

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