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Undressing Medieval Bodies: Exploring Sin, Shame and Sexuality through representations of Nudity and Nakedness in the Middle Ages

Whitney, Rhianne

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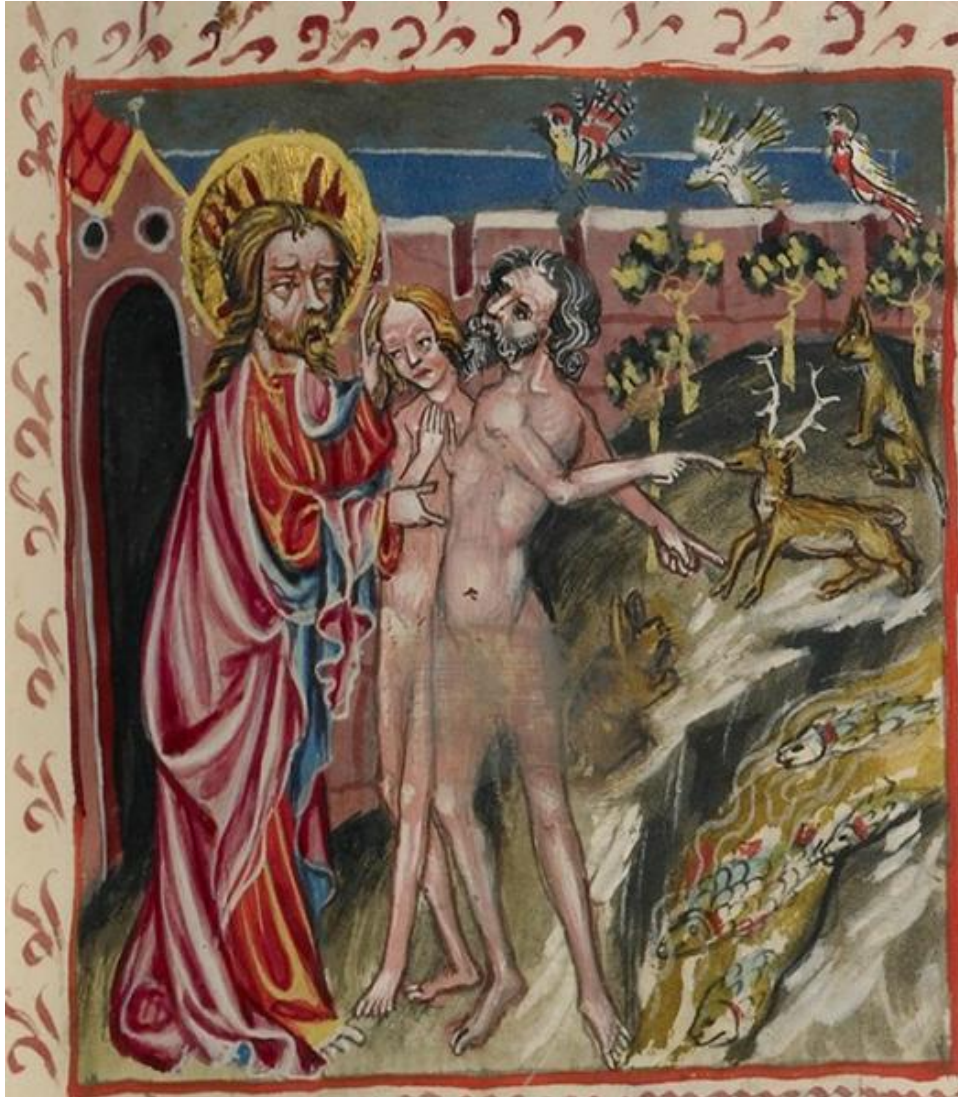
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Undressing Medieval Bodies:

Exploring Sin, Shame and Sexuality through representations of
Nudity and Nakedness in the Middle Ages



A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Literary Studies English Literature and Culture

Master Dissertation

Student name: Rhianne Whitney

Student number: s1953389

Date: 21-06-2021

First reader: Dr. K.A Murchison

Second reader: Dr. A.D.M. van de Haar

Cover image description: Detail of fol. 5r, God with Adam and Eve in Paradise. Ms.33 (1400) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore attitudes towards nudity and nakedness in medieval art and literature by discussing key historical, religious and socio-political contexts surrounding the body and embodiment. By undressing the medieval understanding and approaches to the exposed body, I will present how nudity was received both publicly and privately, and evaluate whether cultural attitudes towards nakedness reflect or challenge contemporary notions of nakedness. Therefore, this research should contribute to a wider historical narrative of the relationship between the naked body and its material environment in both the medieval and modern period.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary archive.org/details/AConciseAnglo-saxonDictionary
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BL	British Library
BT	The Bosworth Toller Dictionary bosworthtoller.com
CCCC	Cambridge Corpus Christi College
DOE	Dictionary of Old English
MED	Middle English Dictionary quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/
MS	Manuscript
OE	Old English
OED	Oxford English Dictionary

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Introduction:

Medieval Bodies: The Naked and the Nude

The corporeal condition of nakedness suffered a negative gloss throughout the Middle Ages. This is because medieval Christianity often used the naked body as a visual metaphor to promote its excessive preoccupation with postlapsarian shame. Consequently, modern beliefs tend to consider medieval perceptions of the body as existing solely within a Christian paradigm that promoted naked shame. This assumption has displaced the medieval nude from serious scholarly attention for some time. Therefore, by exploring representations and responses to bared medieval bodies, I intend to determine how the art and literature of the Middle Ages contributed to a more complex and nuanced understanding of nakedness than is traditionally considered.

Throughout history, the body has been subject to religious, social and political coding. This is especially true of the nude; the naked body has always been a focal point of fascination and collective imagination. In his forward to *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, Benjamin Withers notes how the paradox of the naked body relies on its ability to readily capture both attention and censure in a way that the clothed body cannot.¹ This response explains how nakedness can serve as a vehicle for shedding light on the multivalence of medieval attitudes towards the uncovered body. This thesis aims to explore attitudes towards nudity and nakedness in medieval art and literature by discussing key historical, religious, and socio-political contexts surrounding the body and embodiment. With this in mind, this study also aims to reveal to what extent these medieval responses are

¹ Withers, *Naked Before God*, 1

reflected or challenged in modern attitudes towards the naked body, as part of the wider historical narrative of the relationship between the body and its cultural environment.

The human body occupies a central place in cultural history. In the *History of the Body*, Roy Porter discusses symbolic meanings of the flesh within society. He notes that ‘bodies are objects for the external gaze: they face the outside world. But they are also subjective, integral to the internal self.’² In this way, bodies act as an intermediary between the self and society, and as a result are exposed to social cultivation that often blurs the boundary between the “social body” and the physical body. Suzanne Lewis describes the direct result of this relationship, suggesting that ‘we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures, including our own as well as medieval, give to it.’³ This relationship between the body and society demonstrates the influence that socio-political environments have in shaping how communities, both contemporary and historic, understand and interact with nude bodies.

Before exploring attitudes toward the naked body in the medieval period, we must briefly interrogate the terms “nude” and “naked” to fully realise the implications of these terms. In *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Kenneth Clark’s makes a prominent distinction between the two terms. Working within a traditional art-historical narrative, Clark writes that:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word ‘nude’, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.⁴

For Clark, the nude is the ideal form; it characterises a positive attitude towards the human body that conforms to the classical Mediterranean philosophies on life and beauty. The term

² Roy Porter, ‘History of the Body’ in *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991) 224

³ Suzanne Lewis, ‘Medieval Bodies Then and Now: Negotiating Problems of Ambivalence and Paradox’ in *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox, Benjamin Withers, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003) 15

⁴ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1953* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990) 3

“Naked”, however, implies a deprivation; in this context the body’s lack of clothing. However, this term was not exclusive to the body in the medieval period. “Naked” also described a sword without a scabbard; a tree without leaves and fertile ground without vegetation. In this way, the condition of nakedness described the absence of something expected. Thus, the clothed body was the expected condition of the medieval body within the social order. This emphasis on the clothed body as the promoted norm is reflected in Clark’s assertion that the medieval nude is ‘The Alternative Convention.’⁵ In this chapter, Clark suggests the medieval nude is under a Christianised reformulation so humiliatingly close to nature it can no longer be nude; hence simply naked.⁶ Thus, for Clark, medieval nudity carries with it the postlapsarian undertones of corporeal embarrassment and religious shame. Whilst this is evident, I argue the nude’s role in medieval visual culture is not strictly an alternative convention to classical models; but rather a cultural re-imagining of those bodies within a larger historical narrative. With this social framing in mind and the binary between “nakedness” and “the nude”, I shall refer to nakedness, nudity, and unclothed interchangeably; but reserve the use of the nude for its artistic quality.

This treatment of the medieval nude as “alternative” or “unconventional” is reflected in modern scholarship, as Sherry Lindquist notes how the term “medieval nude” is still considered oxymoronic within the artistic community.⁷ In the introduction to *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, Lindquist also invites the reader to consider why the nude body in medieval art is still an understudied theme. Here she argues that:

accounts that treat the nude in medieval art continue to do so in reference to a traditional art history narrative that only allows nudity in medieval art a narrow range of meaning.⁸

⁵ See Clark, ‘The Alternative Convention’ *The Nude*, 308-347

⁶ Clark, *The Nude*, 911

⁷ Sherry C.M. Lindquist, ‘The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: An Introduction’ *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) 2

⁸ Lindquist, *Nudity in Medieval Art*, 1

To some extent, this treatment of the medieval nude explains the modern assumptions about the medieval body. From a purely art-historical perspective, the nude shifted from the celebrated “ideal form” of antiquity to a symbol of shame in the Middle Ages. However, this modern investigation of the classical past is also invaluable when contextualising the widespread discomfort over the nude and its associated eroticism in the medieval period. This traditional narrative of nakedness reminds us that the nude was not strictly re-born in the Renaissance; it had in fact, as Jane Long asserts, ‘survived through the Middle Ages, both visually and semantically.’⁹ In this way, the relocation of attitudes towards nakedness throughout the early medieval period serves as a springboard for understanding what changed? Why did attitudes towards nudity, at least publicly, seem to alter so drastically?

This shift in attitudes towards nakedness in early medieval Europe, from celebrated to shamed, coincides with the arrival and subsequent influence of Christianity. Therefore, it is not surprising that modern studies of medieval bodies locate their analyses within Christian paradigm that promoted the covered body as preferential. This sentiment is reflected in modern discourse surrounding medieval bodies, with texts like Sarah Brazil’s *The Corporeality of Clothing in Medieval Literature* and Jane Burn’s *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*. Together they show a broader recognition of how the clothed body in medieval literature promotes a civilised social identity.

Caroline Walker Bynum follows a similar line of inquiry in her article *Why All the Fuss about the Body*. Here she insists on the importance of the self as integrated within the social order; as both conscious of being seen, and understanding that what is seen is a construct of the viewer’s gaze. Thus the body became a social signifier, whereupon clothing

⁹ Jane C. Long, ‘The Survival and Reception of the Classical Nude: Venus in the Middle Ages’ *Nudity in Medieval Art*, 47

nakedness was integral to maintaining public image. In this sense, there are two renditions of the “social body,” where inward (self) reflection interplays with outward (public) interpretation. This interaction brings about an involuntary integration of the self within society. Hence, Bynum suggests that physical bodies become ‘a kind of “flesh dress” we take up, or put off, or refurbish according to the latest style.’¹⁰ With the flesh assuming the role of a costume of sorts, the body becomes a construct of the expectations and understandings of any given context. This idea is supported by the work of Suzanne Lewis, who states that ‘nakedness undergoes fashion changes, not only in artistic tradition but in living experience.’¹¹ Understanding nakedness as unfixed in this way lends considerable insight into why depictions of nude bodies are so varied across historical illustrations and narratives. As societies develop and change, so does the human form as it continuously shapes the intersection between the inner-self and outward society.

With this in mind, Bynum elevates this study even further by devoting attention to how modern audiences react to medieval bodies ‘in light of our present preoccupation with identity and the self.’¹² In the conclusion, she writes:

It is not only possible, it is imperative to use modern concerns when we confront the past [...] the present will help us see past complexity and the past will help us to understand ourselves.¹³

This places direct emphasis on the living experience of the modern reader as crucial in helping navigate enquires into the past; with the recognition of our perceived, and socially integrated, selves as the critical tether.

¹⁰ See Caroline Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective’ in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995) 2

¹¹ Suzanne Lewis, ‘Medieval Bodies Then and Now: Negotiating Problems of Ambivalence and Paradox’ in *Naked Before God*, 16

¹² Lewis, ‘Medieval Bodies’ 19

¹³ Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss,’ 31

Drawing on the work of Lindquist, Withers, and Bynum, this thesis will illuminate how the representations of bare bodies in art and literature in the medieval period reflect or challenge contemporary notions of the nakedness. I also aim to address the wider cultural reception to visual nudity by exploring a selection of medieval and modern works that demonstrate the religious, social, and sexual coding of the naked body. This combination of written and visual material will allow an interdisciplinary consideration of a wide range of sources, from biblical translations and illustrations to censorship and discipline. Along with the explicit art of embroidered histories, the treatment of naked bodies in chivalric romance, and the strange world of medieval monsters. This integration of disciplines will also enable a thorough examination of the historical, religious, and socio-political contexts surrounding nakedness and embodiment. By undressing medieval bodies in this way, we can determine how cultural works of the Middle Ages contributed to a complex and often paradoxical understanding of nakedness within the history of embodiment.

The first chapter of this dissertation aims to understand how the conflation of nakedness and shame occurred within Christianity. Beginning with an etymological analysis of “shame”, this chapter will explore to what extent nakedness was associated with sin in religious literature and ritual practices. Through this analysis, I will illuminate how the Church both celebrated and chastised nakedness, depending on the context of the holy body in relation to wider cultural norms. Furthermore, this chapter will interrogate medieval visual culture through the analysis of religious imagery, to assess how artwork in this period contributed to the binary opposition of the holy clothed body and the demonised naked body. Here, I also aim to dispel Catherine Karkov’s theory that ‘maleness was connected to

salvation and virtue, and femaleness to damnation and sin;'¹⁴ through an investigation of biblical illustrations that also display male nakedness as a sign of moral transgression.

Chapter two sets out to investigate the culture of medieval censorship. As the censorship of medieval nudity requires the work of a governing body to mediate what is obscene, this investigation should reveal the extent of influence that the Church and State maintained over the medieval body politic. Here, I will also reveal how the censorship of medieval bodies reflects or challenges modern censorship on social media. This section will also illuminate how confessional literature warned medieval audiences about nakedness, through an examination of ritual penance. The aim here is to understand how nudity was both the focal point of sin, and part of the wider promotion of the confessional ritual. The penitential handbook *Handlyng Synne* will be the focus of this examination, as the text narrates the need for confession through anecdotal tales that reflect the experiences of the medieval laity. This treatment of nudity will be compared with the role of religion in modern Western society, where the influence of the Church on the individual has, in some aspects, moved away from the promotion of naked shame, in favour of rhetoric more 'constructive and hopeful.'¹⁵

The final chapter provides an investigation into how medieval nakedness lends itself to both the erotic and the exotic. Firstly, through popular chivalric romance, I will contemplate the genre-restrictive depictions of nudity in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier la Charrette*. This text will enable me to contextualise gendered nudity and the erotised body within the ideals of medieval courtly society. After this discussion, the explicit art of the *Roman de Lancelot* will be considered alongside the popularisation of silent reading, as the development of silent reading enabled a more private interaction with erotic materials. Here, I

¹⁴ Catherine Karkov, 'Exiled from the Kingdom: The Naked and the Damned in Anglo-Saxon Art' in *Naked Before god*, 183

¹⁵ Charles Gilkey, 'The Function of the Church in Modern Society' in *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1914) 2

aim to reveal how this shift is reflected in modern technological advancements, which have altered the way we engage with nudity in visual culture today. In the final section of this chapter, I will illuminate how medieval nudity functioned as a marker of the monstrous, where bared bodies and exposed genitalia symbolised the uncivilised and other-worldly. Through this othering of nakedness in *Marvels of the East* and Marie de France's lai *Bisclavret*, I will uncover how depictions of nakedness also served to articulate medieval anxieties; as these texts reveal how the unclothed body was often associated with uncontrollable lust and carnal appetite, and thus threatened medieval social order.

Lastly, the conclusion will draw on insight gained from the historical, artistic, and literary approaches applied in the previous chapters to illuminate how the role of nakedness is subjective to a particular context. Here, I hope to argue that the nude body is never *really* naked, but rather it is constantly clothed by contemporary conventions and changing cultural responses. Finally, then, this thesis will conclude with the observation that the role of nudity will continue to shift considerably as we look forwards to research and social development in the next few decades.

Chapter 1: *Holy Nudism*

Holy Bodies: Sin and Shame

Christianity was central to life in Medieval Europe, and the creation of the first bodies in Eden signals the beginning of the importance of the flesh in Christian belief. In the creation narrative of *Genesis A* we may speak of the “religious body”: manifest in divine creation, only to be hurriedly marked transgressive and subsequently shamed. Evidently, nakedness is both celebrated as divine and chastised as sinful, which situates the medieval body within a cultural paradox. Suzanne Lewis reports that medieval audiences were well-aware of this inconsistency, demonstrating a ‘self-consciousness and awareness of the body’s paradoxical nature.’¹⁶ Thus, the spectacle of nudity in the Middle Ages is indisputably tied to these battling forces of exposure and concealment.

When considering *scamu*¹⁷ (shame) in relation to nakedness, we must first understand that this concept is not skin-deep. Instead, shame speaks to the profound emotional and moral responsibility of the bodies that experience it. The Anglo-Saxon vocabulary for shame is rather extensive, a lexicographical attribute to the integration of shame-related values into the vernacular. This shame vocabulary may be divided into being (a)shamed, actively shaming, and shameful. All of which played an integral role in informing medieval bodies by culturally re-orientating the feelings of shame from a matter of social image to the demands made by God. Wilcox articulates this intersection between social image and the feeling of shame as

¹⁶ Lewis, ‘Medieval Bodies’ 28

¹⁷ ‘*scamu*’ *ASD*, 310

first, our ability to feel watched and secondly, being conscious of what other people are thinking about us.¹⁸ Wilcox goes on to define that:

shame is a more serious, more internalised breach of a moral code, whereas embarrassment is more situational [...] and more dependent upon an observer.¹⁹

In the context of social nudity and exposure, the existence of an observer is fixed under the belief system that God is omniscient. Thus, moral transgression is akin to physical embarrassment within a social framework that directly associated the inner-self with a perceived social identity.

The Old English form that most resembles the modern is ‘*sceamu*,’²⁰ which the Bosworth Toller dictionary (BT hereafter) defines as a ‘consciousness of unworthiness or of disgrace.’²¹ Within medieval Christian discourse, this consciousness of disgrace is normalised across humanity as a condition of the postlapsarian experience. The term *sceamu* can also be defined as a response to what causes the feeling of shame. In particular, the BT directly defines this as ‘the private part.’²² For example, ‘*Him sí ábrogden swá of bréchrægle hiora sylfra sceamu*’²³ immediately associates the removal of garments, in particular the breeches (*bréchrægle*), with the shame of nudity (*sceamu*). Particularly, this association implies that the exposed genitalia itself is shameful. Hence, the concept of naked shame is a well-developed within the medieval mind-set. To the extent that the semantics of shame informed the vocabulary of Old English speakers, impacting how bodies were perceived, and subsequently how these perceived feelings were expressed.

¹⁸ Johnathan Wilcox, ‘Naked in Old English’ in *Naked Before God*, 279

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 278

²⁰ ‘*sceamu*’ in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online* ed. Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Toller et al., (Charles University: Faculty of Arts, 2014) < <https://bosworthtoller.com/26561> >

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ ‘most of all, let their shame be revealed as if pulled out of breeches’ [Translation from Javier Díaz-Vera, *Metaphor and Metonymy across Time and Cultures: Perspectives on the Sociohistorical Linguistics of Figurative Language* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014) Sec. 5.3

Unsurprisingly, medieval Christianity contributed to the organisation of the body within these shame-related values. Throughout medieval Europe, the Church played an important role in organising bodies; physically in ritual and prayer, and morally by ascribing the body a series of meanings. Most often, these meanings narrated a negative gloss of nakedness by associating the physical body with shame and sexuality. The effect of this rhetoric becomes increasingly clear when we look at the ritual practice of creating holy bodies; the immersive act of baptism.

In *Naked Baptism in the Early Church*, Laurie Guy notes that up until the eighth-century most baptisms were performed on naked subjects.²⁴ The naked baptism mirrors ‘*Y yede nakid out of the wombe*,’²⁵ and thus the dramatic rite of immersion presented a bared body re-born. Yet, by the mid-eighth-century, naked immersion was succeeded by a baptismal ritual that accommodated the clothed body instead. This movement away from naked baptism occurred as a result of the wider development of shaming mechanisms in Western society. Thus, religious rites that *might* have relied on naked innocence were still overwhelmed by the Church’s negative attitude towards viewing nakedness. Especially female nakedness, as within the Christian tradition, the nude female body is often associated with sexual transgression. Because of this treatment, Guy suggests that the undressing ritual in early baptism could never include women, as they were socialised to be ashamed of displaying their naked bodies before men:

Baptism was normally administered by male clergy and Judeo-Christian modesty would not likely allow a religious practice where female nakedness was exposed to male gaze.²⁶

²⁴ See Laurie Guy, ‘Naked Baptism in the Early Church: The Rhetoric and the Reality’ in *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 27, no. 2 *Research Gate* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 133–142, DOI:10.1111/1467-9809.00167.

²⁵ ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb’ *The Wycliffe Bible*, ed. Sven Fristedt, et al. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktr, 1953) Job, 1:21 (Translation is my own)

²⁶ *Ibid.*

This aversion to viewing female nudity suggests nakedness was problematic in religious sacraments, especially when the symbolic gestures of the body were on display.

Consequently, we see the re-structuring of Christian rituals in the later Middle Ages, to baptise bodies that were both modestly covered and separated by gender. This is one way the physical body and ritual practice was incidentally influenced by the shaming mechanisms that sexualised nudity.

Beyond the baptism, there are a plethora of holy bodies in religious texts that also influenced general receptions of nakedness within the wider narrative of medieval sin, shame, and sexuality. Therefore, it is also crucial to examine the depictions of naked bodies we see confined to the leaves of biblical literature. Often in religious manuscripts, holy bodies such as those of saints and martyrs are represented as only partially clothed or completely naked. These unclothed illustrations usually depict holy bodies in sufferance during the completion of martyrdom. In search of a graphically bared body, we may look to Bartholomew the Apostle (Figure 1) who was reportedly persecuted, flayed, and beheaded for converting the Armenian King to Christianity. In his martyrdom, Bartholomew's uncovered body is on public display as a reminder that spiritual faith can overcome physical anguish; making the martyr a conduit for amplifying corporeal suffering as an essential means of spiritual salvation. In doing so, this sufferance might stimulate co-martyrdom between the allegorical body of the saint and the physical body of the reader. This interaction is located in a transfer of sensation between the martyr and reader/viewer. Yet, as the response is emotional, not visceral, the viewer does not suffer as much. And so in the same way the page is a physical connection between the two bodies, the book is also a boundary in-between this transfer of feeling.

Depictions of naked saints are also important in emphasising the repackaging of nude idols from Pagan and Greco-Roman cultures. On holy bodies, nakedness is transformed

into an enlightened state of existence, whereas naked shame is a condition reserved for the earthly body. This transcendental nature of the Christian body is integral to the living experience of its followers, and the promise of ascendance in the afterlife. However, we must not forget that these holy bodies are figurative; the materiality of which is parchment and ink, not flesh and bone. Brazil draws attention to this concept in *The Corporeality of Clothing*, where she writes:

‘The saint’s body is not an average, human body. It is exemplary and as such is held apart from normative physiological processes.’²⁷

It is a firm reminder that holy bodies are not real bodies; they depict pain, shame, and humiliation in the written and visual sense, but unlike the reader, they do not feel it. Thus, the representation of naked holy bodies across biblical material is rather unique, as they are essentially disembodied.

²⁷ Sarah Brazil, *The Corporeality of Clothing in Medieval Literature*, (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018) 3



Figure 1:

The *Belles Heures*, Detail of f.161r, depicting the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. (1409)

(Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

With this in mind, we may look to the treatment of modern bodies as still subject to these shared shaming mechanisms that display suffering for public viewing. In modern media, celebrities are exposed to daily body shaming through outlets like tabloid newspapers and gossip magazines. The celebrity has essentially become the modern martyr; subject to bodily exposure through intrusive photography and journalism. We might consider this the reconstruction of celebrities as religious figures. Here we see the life and death of idols like Amy Winehouse, whose half-naked body was plastered across news outlets as an image of

shameful self-destruction before her death in 2011. Leonora Cohen notes that this treatment is similar to the experience of:

female martyrdom [that] was simultaneously terribly public and terribly lonely. The eyes of the press feasted on Amy's body, battered and bloodied after each altercation.²⁸

Thus, twenty-first-century viewers are involved in a transfer of sensation similar to the medieval reader, whereupon they form parasocial attachments to celebrity figures. Benson Fraser describes this attachment as the reader's ability to 'project onto the celebrity an interpersonal reality and a moral code, which they can then proceed to emulate'²⁹. Thus like the martyrs before her, Winehouse's body was subject to forms of mass communication that publicly defined her existence. This treatment enabled the perpetual reinterpretation of her "social body" within a wider narrative of shame. In this way, the image of Winehouse's physical deterioration became synonymous with discouraging drug abuse; the non-medical use of which is still considered by some Western governments as immoral. Hence, this body became an anatomical exemplar for the devastating effects of addiction in the twenty-first-century.

Similarly, Bartholomew's flayed body was also used to display anatomical depictions of the medieval body. In the medieval period, investigating the cadaver became an important endeavour for early physicians, and so artistic renderings of nakedness became a medium for preserving human knowledge. This transforms the image of the holy body into a figure of scientific and medicinal learning. An example of this can be seen with Marco d'Agrate's *St Bartholomew Flayed* (1562), an incredibly detailed sculpture (Figure 3) articulating human

²⁸ Leonora Cohen, 'The Martyrdom of Saint Amy Winehouse', *Vice*, July 4, 2015, www.vice.com/en/article/zngmzx/amy-winehouse-our-martyr-235.

²⁹ Benson Fraser, W. Brown, 'Media, celebrities, and social influences: Identification with Elvis Presley' in *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 5, pp. 183-206 (*ResearchGate*, 2005) 106, doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0502_5.

muscles and tendons in a remarkably exact imitation. Discussing this bared body in *Art and Anatomy in Renaissance Italy*, Domenico Laurenza expresses how the Church:

encouraged artists to study anatomy as expedient for conveying the truths of faith to an uncultivated audience with immediacy and realistic, strongly emotive images, the martyred bodies of saints being particularly effective.³⁰



Figure 2:
(left)

Saint Bartholomew,
Matteo di Giovanni,
(1480) The Museum
of Fine Arts,
Budapest.

(Photo: The Web
Gallery of Art,
Hungary)



Figure 3:
(right)

*St Bartholomew
Flayed*, Marco
d'Agrate, (1562)
Duomo di Milano.

(Photo: Felipe Tofani
[2015], by
permission)

Often, renditions of Bartholomew illustrate his flesh flung over the shoulder (Figures 2-3) like one might drape a robe. This image is especially evocative of Bynum's 'flesh dress'³¹, where the nakedness itself becomes clothing for the biological body beneath. Here, the skin acts as a material boundary between the observer's gaze and the shameful private part. This covering suggests that despite the lending of these naked bodies to medical learning, they were still

³⁰ Domenico Laurenza, *Art and Anatomy in Renaissance Italy: Images from a Scientific Revolution*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012) 36

³¹ Bynum, 'Why All the Fuss,' 2

bound to ‘conveying the truths of faith.’³² In the same way modern martyrs are bound to conveying the truths of secular institutions, such as Winehouse and the war on drugs.

Here, we see how the modern state functions similarly to the medieval Church in organising bodies. Gregory Lippiatt remarks that the ‘great invention of the modern, post-revolutionary period of politics is the separation of Church and State.’³³ Therefore, the modern persistence of bodily shame might seem surprising. Especially as modern religion does not govern on a political level in the same way as the medieval Church did; instead, it occupies a more private conscience. On the church in modern society, Charles Gilkey notes that ‘whereas formerly attention was given largely to things of the surface, of late the mind has been directed more to those things which lie beneath.’³⁴ The morality at the core of Christianity remains the same; it has simply adopted a new costume that captures the attention of modern audiences and demonstrates a nature of adaptation alongside them. In *Love & Responsibility* (1981), Pope John Paul II expressed the modern Catholic Church’s attitude towards the naked body:

The human body can remain nude and uncovered and preserve intact its splendour and its beauty. [...] The human body is not in itself shameful³⁵

In this way, modern Christianity looks inwards, and recognises shame as a function of the interior self. And so, just as nude bodies have changed shape and adjusted to cultural fashions, so has the religion that governed these bodies throughout Western history. Here one might attest that contemporary Christianity has dropped its “flesh dress” altogether.

³² Laurenza, *Art and Anatomy*, p. 36

³³ Gregory Lippiatt, ‘Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX’ in *History (London)*, vol. 103, no. 358 (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2018) *ORE Open Research Exeter*, 859 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229x.12693>.

³⁴ Gilkey, ‘Function of the Church,’ 4

³⁵ Wojtyła, *Love & Responsibility*, 255-256

However, in social practice, this new rhetoric has not fully flourished. And this shift towards shame as interior function is rather problematic when nudity is still associated with social embarrassment. But as a society that no longer centralises corporeal shame as an inherent condition of existence, why is the fear of public exposure so basic to the human condition? In 2009 the BBC *Horizon* aired ‘What’s the Problem with Nudity?’ an interdisciplinary documentary that investigated why modern society is so ashamed by its own nakedness.³⁶ Anthropologist Nina Jablonski argued that ‘becoming hairless represented a major step forwards in human evolution.’³⁷ When we look back to the images of Adam and Eve in Eden (Figure 4), we see their nakedness as a natural garment; before the biblical need to cover shamed bodies, they can be no more undressed than the animals around them. Yet modern discourse places more emphasis on social and biological evolution when investigating present responses to embodiment. Here Jablonski argues that the human body as furless and standing upright is exactly what defines us from our animal counterparts; and in this process of evolution, sexual mating has been at the forefront of social and biological development. In the same documentary, psychologist Dan Fessler recognises how:

Over thousands of generations, we've learned that showing off a naked body sends out sexual signals that threaten the security of mating pairs. And we've chosen to agree that that is a bad thing. Shame is the ideal emotion to enforce that code of conduct.³⁸

The emphasis here is that the shame and sexualisation of nudity is not only a learned behaviour, but also an adopted code of conduct. In this way, contemporary shame has become a way of maintaining social standards concerning sex and relationships. Therefore, we are not, as medieval Christianity would suggest, born with shamed bodies, but rather our aversion to nakedness is a product of ongoing social conditioning.

³⁶ BBC Horizon. 2009 ‘What's the Problem with Nudity?’ *BBC* video, 60:00, Feb 2. <www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00j0hnm>

³⁷ Phillip Carr- Gomm, *A Brief History of Nakedness* (Edinburgh: Reaktion Books, 2012) 257

³⁸ *Ibid.*

From Nude to Naked: Visual Culture and Illustrating Gender

*þa hie godes hæfdon
bodscipe abrocen. Bare hie gesawon
heora lichaman*³⁹

The conflation of nakedness and shame in Christianity can be found in the Junius manuscript *Genesis A* poem. The image of Adam and Eve’s nudity in paradise represents a forceful convergence of the naked body in theology with the tradition of sin. The *Genesis* narrative was widely recognised across medieval audiences, and so the impact of Adam and Eve’s naked revelation is crucial in uncovering medieval attitudes towards their own bodies within postlapsarian existence. Yet the reality of manuscript transmission requires attention. Especially when considering the artistic depictions of male and female nudity that accompanied biblical stories, and whether they were ever seen by a general audience or just a select, clerical few. This is something to consider when analysing the gendered nude in the Middle Ages, and its social reception as part of a wider narrative of visual culture and gender identity.

One Genesis text with a clearly outlined readership is the *Holkham Bible Picturebook*. Produced in England sometime in the early fourteenth-century, the *Holkham Bible* is an exquisite example of an illustrated biblical narrative that ‘*mustre serra a riche gent*⁴⁰ (will be shown to/intended for important people). The illustrations in the Genesis section of this manuscript are particularly telling when we compare the difference in gesture between Adam and Eve before their realisation of nakedness (Figure 4), to the illustration of

³⁹ ‘after they had broken the command of God. Bare they saw their bodies’ This and all other OE quotations from *Genesis B* are from: George Krapp, ed., ‘The Junius Manuscript’ *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, Vol.1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931) ll. 782-84

⁴⁰ Add MS 47682: Bible (*Holkham Bible Picture Book*), <www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_47682> f.1r

their expulsion (Figure 5). As already mentioned, Kenneth Clark defines that nakedness implies ‘embarrassment [whereas] the word ‘nude’, on the other hand, [...] carries no uncomfortable overtone.’⁴¹ This sentiment is reflected by the nude bodies that stand upright and with arms outstretched to paradise (Figure 4), in comparison to the hunched figures that hurriedly cover their nakedness (Figure 5). We might consider this image of Adam and Eve, by Clark’s definition, to be the transition that underpins most medieval representations of bared bodies; the transition from nude to naked.

Figure 4:
(left)

The *Holkham Bible*. Detail of f.3v, depicting God showing the tree of knowledge. (c.1327)

(Photo: BL, Digitised Manuscripts)



Figure 5:
(right)

The *Holkham Bible*. Detail of f.4r, depicting Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. (c.1327)

(Photo: BL, Digitised Manuscripts)



The *Holkham Bible* communicates this bodily embarrassment by relying on an understanding between the art and the audience which is integral to visual culture. For example, in seeing the shame felt by Adam and Eve, the viewer engages with their own embodied knowledge of shame. In this way, the text demands the reader has a corporeal and moral response to nakedness that is already deeply coded within medieval society. Here, the reader must process this visual information whilst simultaneously being reminded of the

⁴¹ Clark, *The Nude*, 3

moral implications of the text. This exchange between the book and the body transforms the process of viewing into a mirroring of experiences; through the knowledge of our own bodies, we feel the sin of Eve and share the shame of Adam. In *The Style of Gestures*, Guillemette Bolens articulates how artists, authors, and readers all draw upon their capacity for the physical gesture and embodied knowledge when creating and interpreting artistic and literary works. Bolens describes this emphasis on the reader's cognitive involvement as 'the interactional perception of movements performed by oneself or another person.'⁴² Therefore, by looking at the expectations placed on the medieval reader, it becomes easier to acknowledge how the figures in paradise, suddenly aware of their nakedness, are able to impact the medieval reader in a persuasive and interactional way. For the viewer, this response is involuntary; it is a collaborative process where their bodily shame becomes, albeit briefly, the reader's corporeal reality.

Yet, in the *Holkham Bible*, representations of nakedness were never full-frontal. Even before the addition of the fig leaf, the genitals of Adam were never exposed. Instead, the illustrator incorporated stylised gestures and conveniently placed props that would obscure the male part. This type of genital concealment becomes an overarching theme when attempting to engender medieval nudes. In some examples, no attempts are made to distinguish the naked body as male, except the occasional inclusion of other masculine features, like a broader stature or notably defined facial hair. And so this begs the question why did illustrators consciously avoid depicting male genitalia, and what does this reveal to us about the general reception to male nudity at the same time?

In her essay 'Exiles from the Kingdom' Catherine Karkov notes that the medieval psyche 'inherited a tradition in which maleness was connected to salvation and virtue, and

⁴² Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gestures: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012) 2

femaleness to damnation and sin'⁴³. However, through the *Genesis B* illustrations within the Junius manuscript, we can determine the male body, and in particular male sexuality, was also associated with damnation. Thus, what Karkov recognised as an illustrative convention, associating maleness with salvation, was not a fixed tradition. The MS Junius 11 boasts a collection of biblical poems written in the English vernacular and takes its name from Franciscus Junius who published the first edition of its contents in 1655. Dated around the tenth-century, the *Junius* manuscript pre-dates the *Holkham Bible* by some four-hundred years and might lend insight into why depictions of male genitalia in religious texts were considered morally transgressive.



Figure 6:

MS Junius 11,
Genesis B, p. 13.
Adam and Eve stand
in Paradise, with
various animals
underfoot. (1000)

(Photo: © Bodleian
Libraries, University
of Oxford)

⁴³ Karkov, 'Exiled from the Kingdom,' 183

The *Genesis B* section of this manuscript has been the subject of scholarly attention. It presents an alternate account, or re-telling, of the traditional Fall narrative, whereby Lucifer is centralised as the protagonist of the poem. The codex is also filled with fine line illustrations that accompany the text. These are thought to have been added to the manuscript around the twelfth-century. Although the drawings are quite simplistic, the spaces left by the scribe suggest that these were intended to be further elaborated on. The nudity in the illustration *Fall of Angels* (Figure 7) is of particular interest to this investigation, where it is clear that the falling figures undergo a visual transformation from once angelic forms to a newly demonised state. In the first motif that marks their transgression, the damned lose their clothing, uncovering a nakedness that stands in stark contrast to the cloaked figures above. This visual and spatial transformation enables the illustrators to immediately establish a binary opposition between the holy clothed body and the demonised naked body.



Figure 7:

The Fall of Angels, MS Junius 11, *Genesis B*, p. 13 (1000).

(Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)

In comparison to the genderless qualities of the angelic bodies, the fallen body on the farthest right side of the illustration displays clearly male genitalia. The angels appear unsexed through the concealment of their bodies in robes. This concealment reiterates how

the clothed body was preferential in Christianity; without sexual shame, and closer to God. In this way, the illustration meets the demands of the text by further promoting an understanding that directly associates the gendering of the fallen with sexual sin. In parallel to the semantics of *sceamu* explored previously, in John Clark Halls's ASD the male genital is ascribed the term '*scamlim*'⁴⁴ which shares a clear etymological root with '*scamlic*'⁴⁵ (shameful, disgraceful). The depiction of disgraced angels with disgraced parts is non-surprising. We may also look back to the illustration of Adam and Eve (Figure 6) as another example. Despite their nakedness here, they appear sexless; their genitalia is not hidden or concealed, but rather they do not possess any engendering parts. Thus in many ways, studying the depictions of medieval nakedness is also a study of what is not depicted, and why in particular these omissions are made.

This general reluctance to display male genitalia in religious art has continued into the modern age. In contemporary renditions of the holy body, depicting the phallus is still problematic and associated with the sexed body. For example, the forced closure of Cosmio Cavallaro's exhibition *My Sweet Lord* in Manhattan, 2007. The exhibition included a six-foot chocolate figure of Christ complete with sculpted genitals; one that received backlash from the Christian-right community for being inappropriately sexual. Bill Donohue, head of the Catholic League, went as far as to label the sculpture 'one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever.'⁴⁶ Thus, Christ's exposed sexuality embarrasses modern audiences as much as it did medieval. And within the shame narratives surrounding nakedness in theological contexts, this contemporary response to the rendering of Christ's genitalia in chocolate can be expected. Furthermore, Donohue's response also reminds us of the overwhelming force that organised religion still has over depictions of holy bodies, even in the field of contemporary

⁴⁴ '*seamlim*' ASD, 310

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ BBC, 'Chocolate Jesus exhibit cancelled,' BBC News, 31 March, 2007. <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6513155.stm>

liberal arts. And whilst the religious-right only represents a faction of modern Christianity, their beliefs do support the same conservative socio-political opinions that present viewing the naked body as problematic for medieval and modern audiences alike.

Chapter 2:

The Body Politic

Penance and Punishment: The Disciplined Body

The promotion of the clothed body is central to Christianity; the *Genesis* poem explored in the previous chapter is the archetypal example of this. Janet Ericksen notes that the *Genesis B* narrative also ‘uses literal nakedness to emphasize the need for figurative clothing, and defines part of that clothing as confession and penance.’⁴⁷ As the couple exit Paradise, they also become aware of their spiritual nakedness. This shame is not so easily concealed, and so Adam insists ‘*þæt hie his hearmsceare*’⁴⁸ (that he be punished). Though the ritual of confession and penance is not directly implied in *Genesis*, this exchange between Adam and God does resemble the relationship of the confessor and priest. Adam’s willingness to accept penance for his nudity firmly grounds the transition from clothed to naked as synonymous with the shift from innocence to sin. Therefore, the *Genesis* narrative and accompanying illustrations (Figures 6-7) in the Junius 11 made nakedness an effective conveyor of the penitential message.

The rituals of penance, also known as the sacrament of confession, are included across liturgical texts, homilies, and handbooks known as penitentials. Originating from the Latin *paenitentia*, (regret) and the verb *paenitere* (to be sorry),⁴⁹ the penitentials represent the Christian rite of spiritual reconciliation. Cyrille Vogel refers to these texts as ‘*purement*

⁴⁷ Janet S. Ericksen, ‘Penitential Nakedness and the Junius 11 *Genesis*’ in *Naked Before God*, 258

⁴⁸ *The Junius Manuscript B*, l. 781

⁴⁹ ‘penitence, n’ *OED* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/140138>

*juridique*⁵⁰ (purely legal), and ‘*destiné à la pratique quotidienne de la discipline pénitentielle*’⁵¹ (destined for the daily practice of penitential discipline). This contributed to, as Ericksen describes:

an explicitly penitential view of nakedness in Anglo-Saxon England, one that allows the good Christian little room for bare bodies and unconfessed sin.⁵²

Thus, in the same way that garments were necessary to clothe the earthly body, confession and penance were essential in clothing the spiritual body. Subsequently, the penitentials reveal how religion warned medieval audiences about bare bodies, through enforcing the ritual practice of confessing sin to clothe spiritual nakedness.

This emphasis on moral salvation, along with the ceremonial nature of confession and penance, distinguishes the penitential handbooks from medieval law codes. Yet, as a ‘*purement juridique*’⁵³ (purely legal) tradition, we can locate this literature at the intersection between the Church and State. In *The Tradition of Penitentials*, Allen Frantzen reiterates this dual function of the penitential handbooks, as they not only preserved moral standards but also actively enforced them.⁵⁴ Furthermore, penitentials followed a general structure indicative of their earlier continental models; Frantzen observes ‘the tradition of penitential manuscripts is cumulative.’⁵⁵ Therefore it is understood that there was no clearly codified system of penance in the early medieval period; and despite some standardisation in the later medieval period, the ritual practices of confession were still by no means consistent. This lack of standardisation further demonstrates that the penitentials did not strictly function as

⁵⁰ Cyrille Vogel, *Les ‘Libri Paenitentiales’ Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental*, fasc. 27 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1978) 31 [Translations here are my own]

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Ericksen, ‘Penitential Nakedness,’ 258

⁵³ Vogel, *Libri Paenitentiales*, 31

⁵⁴ Allen J. Frantzen, ‘The tradition of Penitentials in Anglo-Saxon England’ in *Anglo-Saxon England*, Vol. 11, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 4

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27

legislation. However, it does become clear that enforcing the penitentials relies on the priest shouldering both judicial and educational roles.

Despite the oral deliverance of most didactic texts, we can determine the penitentials were repeatedly interacted with as educational literature. A. I Doyle notes that the ‘hard handling’⁵⁶ of penitential handbooks demonstrates that they were frequently engaged with as tools of learning. And due to the subsequent deterioration of handling this material, he argues ‘the actual influence must always have far exceeded the possible total of texts’⁵⁷ available today. This hard handling of texts, alongside the lack of uniformity across penitential literature, suggests it was not the actual penance that mattered so much but the ceremonial rite of performing them. The significance of performing penance could be explained when we look to the healing rituals in early medieval medicine. Here we see similar rituals in the Anglo-Saxon metrical charms. Rooted in the oral tradition of poetry and performance, these remedies emphasised the deliverance of healing rituals through the repetition of gestures and psalms. It was not uncommon then, that the performative context outweighed the curative one. In this way, the spiritual healer can be likened to the earthly doctor, whereupon the spoken word enhances the grand narrative of the confession. Therefore, through this oral demonstration of transgression, the penitent is taught to accept the moral responsibility of their own spiritual restoration.

With the didactic function of this literature in mind, it is also important to consider the readers of these penitential handbooks. The emphasis here is on the confessor, yet the intended audience of confessional literature often focuses on the clergy that administered them. Leonard Boyle best articulates the reality of this readership. He notes that whilst early medieval penitentials did intend to educate the priest, later confessional texts placed greater

⁵⁶ A. I. Doyle, ‘Survey of the origins and circulation of theological writings in English in the 14th, 15th and early 16th centuries’ (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1953) 64

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

concern on ‘the education of the penitent.’⁵⁸ In this way, we might better understand the emphasis placed on the laity by this literature, regardless of their reduced physical interaction with the manuscripts. Therefore, these bodies of texts also provide insight into social history, and so they prove an invaluable dataset when understanding how legislative content informed the public rite of penance.

This shift towards the education of the penitent is demonstrated in the devotional work *Handlyng Synne* (1303) by Robert Mannyng of Brunne. *Handlyng Synne* is based on *Le Manuel des Péchés* (1250 - 1260) by William de Waddington, and focuses on instructing the laity in their preparation for Confession. The text consists of some twelve thousand lines of couplets detailing the Decalogue, capital vices, and the Sacrament of Penance; along with narrative anecdotes that illustrate an entertaining insight into quotidian medieval life. As an English chronicler and monk, Mannyng’s later translation of this text into the English vernacular is more reflective of the penitent laity in focus. So much so, that Mannyng’s records of sins represent what G. T. Shepherd describes as ‘a reduction of the [medieval] world’s experience to a comprehensive moral scheme.’⁵⁹ Therefore, this text situates itself within the wider tradition of medieval confession rituals, as a work of moral guidance that demands the reader’s emulation. This is made possible through the opening lines of the text, as Mannyng positions himself alongside his reader, as a sinner, so they might embark on the journey of penance together:

At þy wurschyp shul we bygyne

*To shame þe fende & shew oure synne.*⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Leonard Boyle, ‘The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology’ in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas Heffernan (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 35

⁵⁹ G. T. Shepherd, ‘Early Middle English Literature’ in *The Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, Vol. 1, (London: Sphere Books, 1970) 69

⁶⁰ ‘With worship we shall begin/ To fight off shame and shove off sin’ (All quotations from *Handlyng Synne* are from Harley. MS. 1701, BL. Transcription: ‘Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse’ Manuscripts Online, Robert of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*. <name.umdl.umich.edu/AHA2735.0001.001> ll. 3-4 [Translations are my own])

Instantly, the collective, cohesive ‘we’⁶¹ aligns the body of the penitent with the body of the text. Here, Mannyng places direct emphasis on the reader’s physical body as a canvas for both demonstrating ‘shame’⁶² and exorcising ‘synne’⁶³. This alignment also presents the problematic nature of rhetoric that promoted the treatment of sin without being mired by sin itself, revealing a complex narrative that operates as both a guide and a warning to readers.

In the section ‘*þe seuene dedly synnes*’⁶⁴ (the seven deadly sins), Mannyng first discusses the vice of Pride. This vice is set within a didactic narrative that warns against taking pride in one’s clothing, aptly titled ‘The Knight and Monk Who Loved New Fashions.’ In this exempla, a fashion-minded knight with a ‘*kote of pryde*’⁶⁵ is killed in combat, and his possessions divided amongst the poor:

*Before þe pore men hyt was broght;
 Þe pore men seyð þey wulde hyt noȝt.
 A clerk stodë þo þere be syde,
 And, prayd for þe kote of pryde.*⁶⁶

Although nobody will accept the ‘*kote*’⁶⁷, not even a ‘*A porë man, by þe way,/ As naked as he was bore.*’⁶⁸ Instead, a clerk observes the garment, and though he did not need it, he desired it. Thus, the monk prays for the ‘*kote of pryde*’⁶⁹ and gladly receives it. But as soon as he dons the coat a fire engulfs him, and the monk is consumed by flames that ‘*brend hys body downne to þe grounde*’⁷⁰. This story teaches us two things; first that pride in one’s clothing requires

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l.3

⁶² Brunne, *Handlyng synne*, l, 4

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Brunne, *Handlyng synne*, l, 2987

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 3376

⁶⁶ ‘before the poor men it was brought, the poor men said they would not accept. A clerk stood there beside, and prayed for the coat of pride’ *Ibid.*, ll. 3373-76

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, l.3376

⁶⁸ ‘a poor man, by the way, as naked as he was born’ *Ibid.*, ll. 5696-97

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ ‘burned his body down to the ground’ *Ibid.*, l. 3385

punishment, and second, that greed is all-consuming; no clothed man should lust for a ‘*kote*’⁷¹ that the ‘*porë* [...] *naked*’⁷² man might need.

The conflation of poverty and nakedness here demands that clothing be seen as a necessary commodity. This concept is well integrated within a medieval cultural consciousness that emphasised clothing as a signifier of socio-economic status. And whilst the impoverished body is still a bared body, the connotations of economic nakedness imply physical hardship, not moral shame. In a society that considered the natural state of the body to be dressed, it is easily accepted that the unnatural state of nakedness is only assumed reluctantly. Thus, the morally decisive end to this tale would see the monk clothing the ‘*porë man*’⁷³ as an act of charity. We can also locate the act of mercy to clothe destitute bodies within biblical teachings, for a naked body is exposed and without protection from external forces. Thus, clothing is also a form of shelter. In *Cloth as Currency*, Daan Keijser articulates that clothing and housing are alike ‘not only because of their shared protective qualities, but also because they were both seen as essential forms of property.’⁷⁴ In this way, vulnerable exposure also indicates a subordinate social status. Nakedness and social subordination also reinstate the shame placed upon an individual exposed within the public sphere.

However, the expectation of naked penance was not reserved for public viewing. In the *Scrift boc* (book of confession), we also see how nakedness in the private sphere was governed through liturgical texts and confession. Dated around the tenth-century or earlier, and located within the CCC MS 190: Penitential, the *Scrift boc* is a translation into West-Saxon. The text is based on the *Capitula Dacheriana* and the *Discipulus Umbrensiū* (ca. 700s) versions of Theodore’s penitential. Here we are informed ‘*Ceorle ne gedafenað þæt he*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, l. 3376

⁷² *Ibid.*, ll. 5696-97

⁷³ Brunne, *Handlyng synne*, l. 5696

⁷⁴ Daan Keijser, ‘Cloth as Currency: Clothing and the Naked in Old Frisian Law’ *Us Wurk: Journal of Frisian Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 3-4 (Groningen: University of Groningen Press, 2015) 72

*his wif æfre nacode geseo,*⁷⁵ which implies the act of viewing nakedness is a corporeal sin. This particular example is also interesting as it corresponds to looking upon nakedness in the private sphere. Thus, the morality codes of the Church were also seen to directly impact domestic relationships within marriages and the homestead. Realistically, nakedness in the home was more common in the Middle Ages than it is now. Typically, most domestic dwellings had few partitions, thus the general living conditions in medieval houses afforded little opportunity for privacy. The idea that it is not right for a man to look upon his wife's nakedness, to medieval audiences and modern, is therefore somewhat impractical. As a tradition then, the penitentials might be seen as closer to moral guidelines as opposed to functional law. But taken outside of the concept that confession and penance demonstrated a need for figurative clothing, this transgression requires physical clothing also. This concept of clothing the soul in Christianity had repercussions on the medieval body, as here the real body is confined to an allegorical condition.

In the same manuscript as the *Scrift boc* we also see the Ermenfrid Penitential, an ordinance created in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings (1066), detailing a list of atonements directed at those who committed violence during the conquest. One penance, for example, required a public 'forty-day penance for each of the enemy soldiers whom they struck during the fighting (*pro unoquoque quadraginta diebus poenitat*).'⁷⁶ Here, we see the penitential function at a constitutional level, where the physical body becomes a canvas on which the intolerance of the secular authority may be written. In this way, disciplined bodies become public exemplar, and subsequently function as a deterrent, in this case from enacting violence despite the requirement of conflict in battle. Another instance of this public penance occurs in the Harley MS 2278, *Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremond*. In this illustration, a

⁷⁵ 'it is not right for a man that he ever see his wife naked' Robert Spindler, ed., *Das altenglische Bussbuch (sog. Confessionale pseudo-Egberti)*, (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1934) 182

⁷⁶ David S. Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War, C. 300-1215* (Suffolk; Boydell Press, 2003) p. 102

group of knights undress in preparation for their ritual atonement (Figure 8). In the centre of the image, the knights present their bare backs to the bishop; exposed and bowing in prayer they receive corporeal discipline. Here, the shame of removing their armour is amplified by this penance taking place in a public space. A knight's armour is also a symbolic extension of their social identity, and so the "naked knight" here is already an oxymoronic image. Therefore, the public removal of this armour to receive corporal punishment utilises nakedness as both physically shaming and socially degrading.



Figure 8:

Detail of fol. 108v, depicting a group of undressed knights doing penance, *Harley MS 2278* (1440) BL, London.

(Photo: Pius XII Memorial Library, Saint Louis University)

Censoring Flesh: Then and Now

Censorship is the suppression of information that is deemed unacceptable, obscene, or even “inconvenient” by governments and other controlling bodies. Unsurprisingly then, the naked human body has a long and complicated history with censorship and erasure. In the twenty-first-century, the growing increase in public interaction with visual and written material has become problematic for censoring the naked body. Whilst the advance of the internet has been monumental in social progression, the Digital Age has also manifest a plethora of ethical issues surrounding online exposure. These issues encompass the management of age-appropriate content: the production and transmission of nude materials; and defining the fine line between artistic nudity and explicit nakedness.

On the contrary, the censorship of explicit materials in the medieval period, at least in terms of written and illustrated nudity, existed on a much smaller-scale. This is partly due to the manuscript culture in the Middle Ages. Texts transcribed by hand allowed for a wide scope of interpolation through both intentional alterations and unconscious errors. Moreover, as physical artefacts, manuscripts were also susceptible to damage and deterioration. In the instances where these alterations appear intentional, we may consider this interaction as an example of medieval censure. Here, the revision of unconventional content mostly depended on who owned or interacted with the material both during and post-production. So as modern readers investigating this textual past, we must consider that the manuscripts available to us today do not wholly represent the intention of the original author or scribe. Nonetheless, clear evidence of medieval censure has survived across both art and literature through alterations made to text and explicit illustrations. Here it would seem that the censure of nakedness played an integral role in governing the body through the medieval social landscape. A

landscape where, as Lippiatt remarks, ‘the ‘Church’ and ‘State’ as independent, essentialist institutions [were] in competition with each other for sovereignty.’⁷⁷ This governing of social space through temporal and moral powers is something to remember when exploring the censure of medieval nakedness; especially when the individual assumes the role of primary censor.

The OED defines a censor as someone who exercises ‘officious supervision over morals and conduct.’⁷⁸ So when we look at the formal aspects of censorship, the modern reader is often directed to the arrival of Gutenberg’s printing press (1467) and the subsequent press laws that this mass book production required. In the fifteenth-century, censorship was exercised by institutions rather than individuals. Here, texts were mostly mediated pre-publication. However, in the early medieval period, the origins of censorship in manuscripts can be located in earlier forms of moral intolerance. Here, censorship was exercised through alternate methods of implementing ideological compliance, for example physically altering or destroying the material. Therefore, in the absence of the pre-production censorship we see today, the erasure of nakedness in manuscripts is enacted post-production. Here, censoring nudity becomes an individual demonstration of moral conformity within the wider rhetoric of religious intolerance.

⁷⁷ Lippiatt, ‘Before Church and State,’ 859

⁷⁸ ‘Censor, n’ *OED* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/29595>



Figure 9:
Detail of f.5r, God with Adam and Eve in Paradise, Ms.33 (1400) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
(Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum)

As explored in the previous section, medieval visual culture did not shy away from depicting naked bodies, but the depiction of genitalia was usually avoided. In a scribal copy of Rudolf von Ems' *Sächsische Weltchronik* (Saxon World Chronicle), a universal history produced sometime in the 1400s, there is clear evidence (Figure 9) of this erasure also known as rubbing. In this image, the genital area of Adam has been excessively scratched away. Thus, at some point in this manuscript's history, a reader/viewer has interacted with the image

to make a point of their own moral stance on the depiction of nakedness. In attempting to date this erasure, we may look to Matthias Däumer's comparison of the surviving copies of the *Sächsische Weltchronik*. Däumer noted that in the process of translation, whole passages of the text were often abridged (or perhaps even censored) to Genesis-compliant verses.⁷⁹ Therefore, we can speculate this erasure to have occurred around the same time these verses were revised, as a further act of compliance that supports the ideological coding of the narrative. Here, the immediate religious context of this nudity is explicitly associated with moral transgression and sexual shame. In this way, we might also see this sexual censorship as an example of learned behaviour, where taking an active role in erasing physical deviance became a moral obligation. Therefore, despite the reality of nudity being normalised through domestic dwellings as mentioned previously; here we see the visual censorship of nakedness in direct response to the biblical demands of the text.

Whilst altering manuscript image post-production is a more private act of displaying intolerance, we also see evidence of the same censure of images within the public domain. An example of public censorship can be seen with Masaccio's fifteenth-century fresco *Expulsion from Paradise* (Figure 10). This late medieval painting depicts Adam and Eve leaving the gates of Paradise in a visible display of grief. When studying the gesture of the two figures here, it becomes apparent that Adam's hands are preoccupied with holding his bowed head as opposed to the customary fig leaf. Initially, the piece reflects the transition the nude was undergoing in the early Renaissance, where artistic styles returned to a more classical model of nakedness.

⁷⁹ Matthias Däumer, 'Eschatological Relativity. On the Scriptural Undermining of Apocalypses in Jewish Second Temple, Late Antique and Medieval Receptions of the Book of Watchers' in *Cultures of Eschatology*, ed. Veronika Wieser, et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020) 292



Figure 10:
Expulsion from Paradise,
 Masaccio (1425-28). Brancacci Chapel, Florence.
 (Photo: Scala/ Art Resource, New York)

However, upon its fixture in the Brancacci Chapel (Florence), lengths of vines were added across the exposed genitals. This addition was only revealed to be an act of censorship over Masaccio's original piece upon its restoration in 1988. Linda Seidel suggests that this censure demonstrates a reaction to 'what must have been perceived to be not merely an inadequate

rendering of the biblical text but, more urgently, an indecorous display of male genitalia.’⁸⁰ Thus, to fully meet the demands of the expulsion narrative, the act of censoring Adam’s naked shame is necessary. In this way, the fig leaf has become a necessary figurative ‘device for concealing something shameful or indecorous.’⁸¹ Despite the clear expressions of anguish (Figure 10), the addition of the censoring prop ensures this nakedness is perceived as unquestionably shameful. Here the fig leaf becomes a symbol synchronous with censoring the shamed religious body.

Unarguably then, censorship also spoke for the individual’s ability to conform to the expected standard. However, an exception to this convention can be seen in the explicit marginalia of the *Bayeux Tapestry*. Dated around the eleventh-century, the tapestry depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England that culminated with the Battle of Hastings in 1066. As a unique example of art and literature combined, the nude bodies in the borders of this illustrated history demand as much attention as the main body of material. Once dismissed as gratuitous pornography, most scholars now agree that these images were not intended to be seen as erotic or sexually stimulating; rather, they represent an embroidered commentary on the body politic, disguised within a sexual tableau.

In this particular section (Figure 11), the male figure forcefully gestures towards the female who shows clear signs of discomfort. This encounter has been described by Gale Owen-Crocker as an analogy for the battle itself, emphasising the strength of the approaching Norman-French army; where ‘like the naked woman, Harold of England is about to be overcome by force.’⁸² In reading the gesture of the woman as dismissive and unwelcoming, the imminent over-powering of her body mirrors the power dynamics of the forces in the conquest. Furthermore, as an artefact of French history, this marginal microcosm also sheds

⁸⁰ Linda Seidel, ‘Nudity as Natural Garment’ in *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, p. 213

⁸¹ ‘fig leaf, n’ *OED* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/70048>

⁸² Gale Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004) 316

light on the gender politics of medieval bodies. As the aggressor in the act, William the Conqueror's oncoming attack is reflected the display of male virility. On the contrary, Harold Godwinson's defeat is captured within the female body in this non-consensual encounter; naked and thus especially vulnerable, she bows her head in shame. Thus, as a political commentary played out through an act of transgressive sexuality, this best explains why the genitals in this case were not censored. Perhaps here, the use of the lower border as presenting an impure or corrupt version of the world is supported by the spatial association with damnation; within this context, it is understandable then that the naked bodies appear here.



Figure 11:

Lower margin detail of scene 13, *Here came a messenger to Duke William*. (c.1200). City of Bayeux, Normandie.

(Photo: Musée de la Tapisserie: 2017)

However, this sexual allegory for military defeat was not so well received in the nineteenth-century. The reluctance to reproduce this encounter is clearly demonstrated with the Victorian reproduction of the *Bayeux Tapestry*. In this embroidered copy, attempts at censoring the depicted genitalia resulted in subtle adjustments in gesture and neatly embroidered garments for the naked men who required them. Perhaps this selective censorship offers a glimpse into a later female intolerance over depicting encounters that not only display male nudity, but also depict women as sexual conquests. In this way, naked

bodies are still subject to the social and moral coding of the institutions and individuals that made and displayed them.

Remarkably, in the Victorian reproduction of the *Bayeux*, the female breast is not included in this censorship; it is, after all, a replica produced by women. However, female bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were still oppressed through intolerance and sexual commodification. This treatment of women's bodies has perpetuated throughout the last few centuries, reflected in a modern intolerance of the female nipple as explicitly sexualised. This sexualisation has become increasingly obvious as we move farther towards the twenty-first-century, as we encounter the advances in digital technology. In the same way that the printing press proved problematic for mediating content in the fifteenth-century; the internet has become the thorn in the side of modern censorship. It has been argued that the birth of the internet foreshadowed the death of censorship. However, as Gabriella Mas reports, today there is a plethora of legislative bodies that mediate what content qualifies 'as "obscene" [allowing] for maximum freedom of expression while maintaining control of inappropriate content.'⁸³ The female nipple is at the centre of this ongoing debate over online inappropriateness. Whilst actual photographs of topless women on public forums, like Instagram, remain to be a sensitive and ethical issue, the mediation of nudity in art and literature is still under constant review. According to the community guidelines of Instagram (titled under Appropriate Imagery) it is stated:

We don't allow nudity on Instagram, with some exceptions, like photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK.⁸⁴

⁸³ Gabriella Mas, '#NoFilter: The Censorship of Artistic Nudity on Social Media' in *Journal of Law and Policy*, Vol. 54 (Washington: Washington University Press, 2017) 308

⁸⁴ 'Instagram Community Guidelines FAQs.' *What do our Community Guidelines cover?* Instagram, April 19, 2018. <about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-community-guidelines-faqs>

These guidelines demonstrate a series of formal policies that did not exist for medieval bodies. In fact, the breast received little attention as a sexually explicit image in the medieval mind-set. When we look back to depictions of nipples in the Middle Ages, meanings surrounding the breasts concentrated mostly on religious and nutritive associations.

Breastfeeding was considered a defining aspect in the function of the female body, and with notable depictions of the Nursing Madonna, it might come as some surprise to the medieval audience to witness a modern aversion to women's nipples. The modern intolerance of women's breasts may be explained through the contemporary conflation of the female body with eroticism. Here, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the maternal implications of the nipple from the sexual. We may thank movements such as Free the Nipple (2014) for the more positive and naturalistic outlook on the female breast today, however it could be argued that history has uttered this rhetoric for some time.

The modern justification for the formal censorship of nakedness is protecting community standards. On the one hand, modern censorship is fundamental for safeguarding online habits, but on the other hand, represents a form of social control that is already struggling to function in a vast digital environment. One problem of this standardised intolerance is that women's bodies are unfairly targeted. For many modern women, it is exasperating that the exposed breast is considered obscene and inappropriate, but the roots of this social intolerance are to be located in much earlier forms of intolerance. The rampant sexualisation of the breast has steadily become normalised through selling the female body as a profitable commodity in journalism, advertisement, and porn. This commodification, as briefly considered previously, occurred throughout the late modern period too. In response to this commodified view of the female body, modern communities continue to protest the naked ban. In Europe, internet usage and censorship are rapidly expanding at the same time. The continuing growth in internet usage has resulted in an increasing number of artistic depictions

of female nudity being flagged as grossly inappropriate. In response to this censorship, online communities have been exercising their protest by post-censoring art with even more “obscene” imagery (Figure 12):



Figure 12:

Ride 'Em Cowgirl,
Matt Bailey (2020).
Nude woman is
censored by a sticker
that reads Fuck
Censorship.

(Photo: *Instagram,*
@baileyillustration,
by permission)

Matt Bailey reported that this illustration (Figure 12) of a nude woman was censored by Instagram a total of four times in 2019. Despite being an artistic rendering and not an actual photograph, Instagram flagged the image for going against their policy on exposed breasts. According to the website guidelines, because the breast is not actively engaged in breast-feeding, or displaying a post-mastectomy scar, it must be inappropriately sexual. Remarkably, due to the addition of the phallic censure, the post has remained on Instagram, unreported or flagged, since December 2020. Yet again, we are reminded of the unequal treatment of male

and female nakedness in modern society, in particular the persistent sexualisation of women's bodies. Even in 2021, we see artists re-encountering the fig leaf; using props such as flowers and stickers to avert the eye, or digitally blurring the body through a process of pixelisation not unlike manuscript rubbing. Whilst the ethical issues of modern consumption and exposure cannot be ignored, in many ways, it seems technological developments have afforded the individual more freedom of expression. However, modern censorship assures that this "freedom" is always going to be met by organised attempts at limiting these forms of expression. Censorship is, after all, a form of institutional control. Here, we are left wondering if the sphere of influence is the same between the medieval Church and the policies of Instagram. And at what point, then, is this censorship merely an imposition of a particular institution's value judgment on how bodies should be viewed in society? Here nakedness is just one small part of a larger narrative that sees bodies mediated, censored, and re-designed in order to suit an organised, albeit biased, perspective.

Chapter 3:

The Erotic and the Exotic

Unclothing courtly love: The Eroticised Body and the Reading Tradition

As we can see, the history of sin is rather entangled with the history of sexuality. Christian teaching promotes covering the body to avoid sexual attraction and tame the flesh. Yet as Jacqueline Murray notes in *Discipline and Desire*, throughout the Middle Ages the lay majority ‘were not easily persuaded to abandon activities that seemed so natural and fundamental to human life.’⁸⁵ This tension between medieval society’s attempts to control sexual bodies and the individual’s need to express desire can be observed in representations of nakedness in popular romance.

Chivalric romance originated in medieval France around the twelfth-century and began to flourish across medieval Europe as poetic attention shifted to the idealised culture of courtly life. Within this courtly milieu, clothing concealed the eroticised body, presenting instead the ideal construction of a social body. Yet within chivalric love, this intermingling of erotic desire and moral attainment enabled the naked and sexed body to be explored within the social restraints of high society. To explore this development, I will look at depictions of Guinevere’s body in Chrétien de Troyes’ twelfth-century *Lancelot au Le Chevalier la Charrette* alongside the nude illustration of Guinevere and Lancelot in the *Roman de Lancelot* (1220). By uncovering how medieval audiences experienced textual nakedness through

⁸⁵ Jacqueline Murray, *Discipline and Desire: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) xii

narratives of desire, we might better understand the relationship between nudity and the eroticised body.

In practice, sexual encounters in early medieval narratives were powerfully evasive. This makes reading Lancelot's erotic exploits a lot more complex than say, an edition of *Playboy*. Often medieval readers were warned against works of a sexual nature, such as the *Roman de la Rose* (1230), as immoral tales of lust that might encourage people to lechery. However, allusions to sexual nakedness in these tales are often veiled in allegory or obscured beneath double entendre and euphemisms like in *The Exeter Book* (990) riddles. Thus for medieval audiences, explicit nakedness was not a requirement in constructing the body as an object of desire. The intimate scene between Lancelot and Guinevere in Troyes' *Le Chevalier la Charrette* can attest to that.

The romance was composed around 1175 by the commission of 'la contesse'⁸⁶ Marie de Champagne, who provides both '*Matiere et san li done et livre*'.⁸⁷ The narrative follows Lancelot on his quest to rescue Guinevere, and ultimately it is a quest motivated by love. In the moments before their sexual union, Lancelot observes Guinevere through a window:

*En une molt blanche chemise,
N'ot sus bliant ne cote mise,
Mes un cort mantel ot desus
Déscarlate et de cisemus.*⁸⁸

Here the female body is implicitly sexualised through her clothing, but more specifically the lack of a '*cote*'⁸⁹ (coat) or '*bliant*'⁹⁰ (over-garment). This sexualisation of the body thorough

⁸⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992) l. 27

⁸⁷ 'the subject/ And its meaning' Troyes, *Le Chevalier*, l. 26 [Translation from Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot: The Knight of the cart*, trans. Burton Raffel (London: Yale University Press, 1997) ll. 26-27. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are from this edition]

⁸⁸ 'Dressed in a snow-white gown/ She wore neither a coat/ Nor any covering but a short/ Red cloak' Troyes, *Le Chevalier*, ll. 4579-82

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 4580

clothing is typical of chivalric romances, as Burns remarks how authors ‘tend to fetishize their heroines by describing clothed body parts as if they were naked.’⁹¹ A custom best suited for the poem’s public performance in court. Here it is for the listener to undress this body and see for themselves beneath the ‘*cort*’⁹² (short) robe.

Moreover, the reader/listener here observes Guinevere’s eroticised body through Lancelot’s gaze. This gaze reminds us of the Christianised concern that looking upon the naked and sexed body is a commitment of sin. In *Handlyng Synne*, on the section against the vice of Lechery, Mannyng warns his (male) reader against looking at women:

*Beholde nat wymmen ouer mochyl;
Here syzte makeþ mennys þoghtes fykyl*⁹³

Here, even the ‘*syzte*’⁹⁴ (sight) of women was a concern to controlling male desire. Thus, narratives that imply the need to control lust address the textual tradition of male readers and male gaze. Within this textual tradition, it is not surprising therefore that Mannyng’s overall tone places the fault of this sexualised gaze on the female body:

*What wymmen hem tyffe,
To foly loue, ouþer men to tulle.*⁹⁵

Here, looking at women who ‘*tyffe*’⁹⁶ (dress up), rather than undress, is also a ploy to entice men. This illustrates the paradox of the male gaze. When women cover their bodies with

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2014) 70

⁹² Troyes, *Le Chevalier*, l. 4581

⁹³ ‘Do not look at women too much, The sight makes men’s thoughts deceitful’ Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ll. 8133-34

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ ‘Women will adorn themselves, To sinfully lure over men’ *Ibid.*, ll. 7611-12

clothing and adornments, they do so sinfully to enact male arousal; and when women un-dress their bodies, their nakedness is both shameful and salacious. The idea that women are taught that beauty is a valuable commodity, only then to be criticised for displaying themselves is not an inconsistency fixed to the medieval period. Contemporary objectification flourishes under the same assumption that vanity is an integrated aspect of women's gender performance. This alleged vanity becomes a way to transpose male accountability over erotising the female body when both naked and dressed.

In *Le Chevalier*, however, the gaze of Lancelot is not so ambivalent. Here the female body is admired as opposed to avoided. Driven by desire, Lancelot eventually passes the boundary into Guinevere's private bedchamber. Here '*la rien*'⁹⁷ (the Queen) embraces him, '*et l'étreint contre sa poitrine/ Si l'a lez li an son lit tret.*'⁹⁸ The '*lit*'⁹⁹ (bed) itself is a symbol imbued with sexual meaning, occupying a narrative space for intimacy and privacy that medieval audiences were fully aware of. The implied presence of the bedchamber suggested a place for intimate communication. Perhaps then, nudity is not directly referenced here as the audience already envision the lover's as naked in the bedchamber. This suggests the romance author places certain emphasis on the reader/listener to supplement the more erotic aspects of the narrative.

This expectation of audience imagination is also evident in the climax of Lancelot and Guinevere's sexual union. Here Troyes reveals very little, instead employing a meta-commentary that reiterates the constraints of the *chanson*:

*Mes toz jors iert par moi teüe,
qu'an conte ne doit estre dite.
Des joies fu la plus eslite*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 7611

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 4680

⁹⁸ 'and holds him tight against/ Her breast, making the knight/ As welcome in her bed' *Ibid.*, ll. 4656- 57

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 4657

Et la plus delitable cele

*Que li contes nos test et cele.*¹⁰⁰

As the act of intimacy is not explicitly narrated here, the emphasis is on the reader to peek through the narrative veil and penetrate the deeper meaning. This interaction with the narrative certainly ascribed a new and morally ambiguous meaning to reading for pleasure. Especially if the reader is able to engage with the text privately, allowing room for a more personal interpretation of what the text does not supply.

The development of private reading prompted a shift from oral to visual culture during the High Middle Ages. Traditionally, *chansons de geste* and court romances were composed in verse and orally performed to entertain nobility. And whilst the laity still experienced romance narratives through similar spoken performances; in court and secular society, the practice of asocial reading was slowly becoming popularised. This popularisation of independent study allowed audiences to engage with literature more intimately and without overt religious guidance or censure. In *The Origins of Silent Reading*, Paul Saenger notes before the thirteenth-century ‘erotic decorations in books were usually oblique.’¹⁰¹ Therefore, the increase in explicit manuscript illustrations from the twelfth-century onwards exhibits this emerging visual culture as a direct result of vernacular romances intended for private, visual reading.¹⁰² This shift toward visual reading can be seen in a fourteenth-century edition of the exploits of Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair, in the *Lancelot-Grail* (1235). This later edition, based on Troyes’ *Le Chevalier* narrative, clearly illustrates the sexual encounter (Figure 13). Despite the sheet that conceals their lower parts, Guinevere’s ‘*poitrine*’¹⁰³ (breast) is clearly

¹⁰⁰‘But never will be told by me that which shouldn't be told in a story. Of all joys the most rare and delicious is that which the story is silent about and hides from us.’ Troyes, *Le Chevalier*, ll. 4680-84 [Translation from Debora Schwartz, ‘Guinglain and Lancelot: The Nightmares in Le Bel Inconnu’ in *Arthuriana*, Vol. 12 (Indiana: Scriptorium Press, 2002) 25

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 274

¹⁰³ Troyes, *Le Chevalier*, l. 4656

visible, and the two bodies are evidently naked. Thus, it can be said that artists throughout the later medieval period could take advantage of the popularisation of private reading; displaying more erotic images that would otherwise be censured in public and liturgical texts. Here the bodies are no longer hidden within the narrative; they become a spectacle of corporeal interaction. In the same way the martyred body collaborated sufferance with the viewer, this image collaborates a somatic response from the silent reader; a physical and affective reaction to the bared bodies in the bedchamber. Thus, the development of silent reading also reflected human desire for privacy. Instead of oblique images that might repress desire, within this narrative head-space, illustrations might excite the reader.



Figure 13:
Lancelot-Grail.
 (Additional MS
 10293) Detail of
 f.312v, Lancelot and
 the Queen in bed
 together (1316)
 (Photo: BL, Digitised
 Manuscripts)

Hence, Saenger notes how silent and private reading flourished alongside ‘the existence of twelfth-century erotica [that] was possible because of the new intimacy between

author, reader, and book.’¹⁰⁴ This new textual relationship saw the revival of erotic material for the courts and clerical community. In his chapter ‘Reading the Dirty Bits’, Andrew Taylor remarks that:

Dirty reading did not go entirely unnoticed; criticism of clerics for being seduced by the blandishments of rhetoric or marginal illuminations is well known.¹⁰⁵

Thus, the increased textual visibility made possible through private study was also met with criticism concerning reading as a pseudo-sexual activity. Perhaps for the medieval reader, the inner privacy of silent reading is reminiscent of the privacy of the bedchamber, where the mind functions as an intimate and sensual space. This allowed the medieval reader to ‘extrapolate images from a text and place them in a sustained fantasy.’¹⁰⁶

This discreet consumption of explicit material is reflected in more modern developments of the reading practices in the twenty-first-century. And while modern erotica does not require as much supplementation from the reader, the idea of sustaining internal fantasy is still a centralised aspect. The private and intimate textual relationship in the modern age is advanced through the innovation of e-book reading. In the same way that silent reading stimulated a late-medieval revival of the erotic; the e-book phenomena allowed contemporary readers to engage with erotic texts more discretely. For example, the popularity of E.L. James’ erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* is commonly attributed to the success of the e-book. The subtle nature of this new format allows readers to enjoy this sexual material in a public setting without fear of embarrassment or social exposure. Moreover, the e-book enables the modern reader to access a wealth of literature without the labouring weight of a book or codex. Therefore, it is not surprising that e-readers encouraged a mainstream revival of modern erotica, with *50 Shades* achieving the highest-grossing e-book in 2012. Thus, when

¹⁰⁴ Saenger, *Space Between Words*, 250

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Taylor, ‘Reading the Dirty Bits’ in *Discipline and Desire: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 286

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

we look back on the narrative veiling of Guinevere's slight robe and that night of undisclosed passion, the changes in sexual values and visibility that have occurred in Western culture are considerable. And as modern readers, understanding the larger cultural phenomena surrounding the normalisation of the naked body as a sexualised body is important. It becomes clear then, that the visual and textual representations of complete nakedness that are commonplace in erotica today captured minimal erotic attention from the medieval romance authors.

Nakedness: A Marker of the Monstrous

The weird and wonderful world of medieval monsters might seem a strange landscape to locate nakedness. However, as the clothed and Christian body was the ideal representative of the social standard; the naked body was understood to be immoral, uncivilised, and monstrous. The etymology of “monster” reveals a theological origin; it is both ‘something marvellous [and] a divine portent or warning.’¹⁰⁷ Thus, monsters exist outside of divine creation; a reminder of the moral and physical distance between the European Christian body and the foreign, monstrous, other.

Often humanoid in appearance, these naked figures appear in ancient texts like the *Liber Monstrorum* (Book of Monsters), adapted and translated into the *Marvels of the East* in the late tenth-century. This quasi-zoological travel guide functioned similarly to a bestiary. So in the absence of tangible evidence, the continental material was copied at face-value. One outcome of this copying was the freedom of scribal interpolation, often used to assign the monstrous body a certain moral or metaphorical meaning. Hence, the vision of nakedness,

¹⁰⁷ ‘monster, n’ in *OED* < www.oed.com/oed2/00150782>

already an unfavourable symbol of sin, shame, and sexuality for medieval readers, was also implemented as a marker of the monstrous.

Consequently, the medieval psyche operated under a system of belief structures that recognised clothing as intrinsically bound to humanness and civilisation. This way of thinking further perpetuated a list of epistemological binaries stemming from the ethics of good and evil, and culminating here with the clothed and the unclothed body. Thus, nakedness is a clear identifier of the monstrous body, with the absence of clothing signifying the absence of humanity. Hence, anxieties over presenting human nakedness are not transposed onto these monstrous bodies; often untouched by censure, these creatures are usually depicted fully nude to visually promote their disparity.

A prime example of this nakedness in *Marvels of the East* is the Donestre (Figures 14-15). This male-bodied, lion-headed beast supposedly lured foreign travellers by conversing with them, only to devour their bodies and mourn the head they cannot obtain. In these illustrations, the immediate contrast between the clothed and the naked could not be clearer. The most striking element here is the display of the *scamlim* (private part); firmly situating the Donestre as distinguished from a shame-fearing Christian body. Dana Oswald suggests the exposed genital here is also a terrifying reminder of this body's reproductive capabilities within the reader-viewer's imagined world.¹⁰⁸ The Donestre's explicit display of manhood presents a horrifying assumption that the monstrous body might interfere with human reproduction. Thus, the presence of a woman (Figure 14) is significant. Initially, she appears to be a clothed foil. However, with her dress-skirts she enacts an unusual gesture that simultaneously both reveals and conceals her body. Clearly, this woman is an equally

¹⁰⁸ See Dana Oswald, *Monsters, gender, and sexuality in medieval English literature* (Woodbridge: D.S Brewer, 1975)

immoral, and foreign, figure. This gesture, coalesced with the exposed phallus suggests the ritual of devouring is sexualised as a consummation of lust.

The vivid illumination of the genitals (in Figure 15) may further attest to that, with the bright red pigment accentuating the reproductive organ that further alludes to the fulfilment of sexual appetite. This locates the monstrous body at the intersection of gender and sexuality studies; as a firm embodiment of social fears such as carnal lust, appetite, and bodily violence. Thus, their nakedness serves to amplify and illustrate these very human anxieties. This display of nudity is also a clear reminder that nakedness is never incidental in medieval art. In the MS Tiberius B (Figure 15) for example, there are a further twelve illustrated scenes involving naked or half-naked monsters in a variation of obscene gestures that illustrate their otherness.



(left)

Figure: 14

Cotton MS Vitellius A XV (1200) Detail of f.103v, Donestre, about to devour a human leg.

(Photo: BL, Digitised Manuscripts)



(right)

Figure 15:

Cotton MS Tiberius B V/1 (c.1200) Detail of f.83v, A Donestre lures a man whilst the others eat flesh.

(Photo: BL, Digitised Manuscripts)

This concept of the naked body as demonstrating monstrosity can be found throughout the medieval period. Through reading these bodies in Old English literature like *Marvels of the East*, it is apparent that monstrosity is a fixed condition. Yet, as we move towards Middle English literature, monstrous bodies can be transformed. The *Lais of Marie de France* is a collection of short popular romances, composed into verse during the twelfth-century. Here we find the *lai* of Bisclavret, who is both a ‘*Beala chevaliers*’¹⁰⁹ (handsome knight) and a ‘*Garulf*’¹¹⁰ (werewolf). Bisclavret’s transformative body relies on clothing and nakedness as respective markers of his humanity and monstrosity. The feral body of the lycanthrope was well-known throughout the Middle Ages, canonically associated with wild landscapes, fear, and predation. Hence, Bisclavret’s identification within courtly society as a ‘*Beala chevaliers*’¹¹¹ locates the monstrous body closer to home. He is ‘*est beste salvage*’¹¹² (a savage beast), not only ‘*Es granz forez converse*’¹¹³ (deep in the forest), but also within the community. This hybrid body represents a new threat to the social order and the civilised identity; a threat that Oswald suggests is ‘the danger of transformation and the miscegenation that results from these new bodily states.’¹¹⁴ The miscegenation of a monstrous body whose corporeal condition is not fixed is inherently more terrifying. The monster is unseen but nonetheless present.

This threat of monstrous miscegenation is integrated within the wider narrative that taught the medieval laity to be ashamed of lust and sexuality. Carnal appetite is a condition of the inferior, material, realm. Thus, Bisclavret’s metamorphosis is a threat to

¹⁰⁹ Marie de France, ‘Bisclavret’ ed. Erich von Richthofen, *Vier altfranzösische Lais : Chievrefeuil, Äustic, Bisclavret, Guingamor* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) l. 17 [All quotations are from this edition. Translation from Marie de France, ‘Bisclavret’ trans. Robert Hanning, Joan Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie De France*, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1978) l. 9. All translations are from this edition]

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 9

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ ‘a handsome knight’ *Ibid.*, l.17

¹¹² *Ibid.*, l.12

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Oswald, *Monsters, gender, and sexuality*, 116

social order; a social order that operated under a strict feudal regime. However, as Bisclavret exists on the cusp of the human/animal boundary, Lurkhur notes how he can reject this ‘noble society [...] which stressed the importance of mastering bodily urges, like lust and hunger.’¹¹⁵

Thus Bisclavret, like the Donestre, gives himself freely to bodily urges:

*En cele grant forest me met
Al plus espés de la gualdine,
S'i vif de preie e de ravine.*¹¹⁶

In the fulfilment of this carnal appetite to hunt and eat, there is the acceptance of the intimate and impulsive self.

However, clothed and Christian bodies also enter this wilderness to fulfil their hunger. Hunting was a popular sport amongst the court, and so the aristocracy possesses the same appetite as the wolf; a desire to hunt and devour:

*Tant que li reis ala chacier.
A la forest ala tut dreit*¹¹⁷

By transposing this symbol of nobility into a monstrous one, it becomes apparent that this fulfilment of desire is repackaged continuously; it is only ‘*salvage*’¹¹⁸ (savage) and feral because of the naked body that performs it. Here, medieval identity is not simply informed by people’s actions, but more fundamentally by the bodies they possess. Thus, as Oswald concludes, ‘monstrous bodies represent the problems inherent in human bodies’¹¹⁹ and human

¹¹⁵ Karen Lurkhur, ‘Body and Identity in le Chavlier de la Charette’ in *Viator*, Vol.45 (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014) 116

¹¹⁶ ‘I go off into the great forest,/ in the thickest part of the woods,/ and I live on the prey I hunt down’ France, *Bisclavret*, ll. 63-66

¹¹⁷ ‘Until, one day the king went hunting;/ he headed right for the forest’ *Ibid.*, ll. 136-37

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 12

¹¹⁹ Dana Oswald, *Monsters, gender, and sexuality*, 2

identity. Here, the fulfilment of carnal hunger and uncontrolled desire is a threat to the medieval social order.

As explained previously, there is also the fear that nakedness represents the erotic and transgressive. This is further illuminated in the *lai* when Bisclavret's wife steals his clothing: the marker of his humanity and conduit to his regular body. The ability to do so is hinged on Bisclavret's one vulnerability; the undressing and re-dressing ritual. Bisclavret informs his wife '*jeo vois tuz nuz*'¹²⁰, as the removal of his material covering signifies his monstrous transition. Yet, this metamorphosis from man to '*beste salvage*'¹²¹ (savage beast) is intimate and discrete; his nakedness is still guarded from the reader. Ironically, whatever monstrosity is revealed is also hidden at the same time. And arguably, the Christian soul within Bisclavret is unaffected by the monstrous body. This is reiterated by the re-dressing scene at the end of the *lai*:

*Cist nel fereit pur nule rien,
Que devant vus ses dras reveste
Ne mut la semblance de beste.
[...] Mult durement en a grant hunte*¹²²

Where even in '*beste*'¹²³ (beast) form, Bisclavret will not reveal his nakedness. This modesty perfectly demonstrates the social consciousness of being seen, situating the werewolf within the shame-related values of bodily exposure. Bisclavret demonstrates humanity after all. Here, the *lai* debates the relationship between the body and social identity. This is achieved through Marie challenging the dichotomies of the wild and civilised landscapes, and more essentially, the bodies categorised within them. Here, the binary tradition that the wilderness is home to

¹²⁰ 'I go stark naked' France, 'Bisclavret', l. 70

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, l.12

¹²² 'This beast wouldn't, under any circumstances,/ in order to get rid of his animal form,/ put on his clothes in front of you;/ [...] he's just too ashamed to do it here' France, 'Bisclavret' ll. 284-88

¹²³ *Ibid.*, l. 249

the wolf, and the court home to the King, is overturned. Bodies that blur the boundaries between human/animal, civilised/feral, and rational/carnal thus appear to be the most monstrous. However, the duality of the Donestre and Bisclavret best represents the moral dilemma of mankind; the constant battle between social obligation and innate desire.

As an emblem of duality, the perseverance of the monstrous body within the Western imagination may be explained by how the monstrous interrogates two, disparate areas of concern. In the medieval mind-set, divergent bodies are deviant or dangerous, but they may also represent medical, or creational, imbalances. Under the concept of ‘*unhælu*’¹²⁴ (un-whole), these bodies do not physically fulfil the image of spiritual design. Nonetheless, as the etymology of “monster” has revealed, as portent bodies, they are direct from God; misshapen and instable, but also exceptional. If the medieval author can locate the bared and monstrous body of the Donestre with the sin of lechery, they may also read the circumstances of ‘*unhælu*’¹²⁵ as divine punishment.

Thus, when we look to the “monstrous” body in later centuries, we might turn to modern depictions of the non-normative body. Especially in light of the damaging history of defining people with distinctly abnormal bodies as divergent. As the antithesis of Clark’s nude ‘body re-formed’¹²⁶, the pleasure of viewing the naked body *deformed* can be located within the uncanny; a quality that the bared bodies of the Donestre and the werewolf share. Outside the literary uncanny, the form of voyeurism that emerged in the nineteenth-century with travelling carnivals relied on the display of *actual* abnormal bodies as a sight of both marvel and terror. This mode of entertainment reveals a dark, but irrepressible human fascination for viewing the “alternative” form. The ‘freak-show’ is morally condemned within a contemporary understanding of the monstrous, as *actual* abnormal bodies are recognised

¹²⁴ ‘sickness, infirmity’ BT

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Clark, *The Nude*, 3

today as disabled bodies. This is not to identify disability with monstrosity, but rather to suggest that these bodies share a crisis of representation that is deeply problematic.

The struggles with disability visibility can be identified through the increasing apathy over representing reality in modern media. One notable exception to this convention is Eduardo Casanova's *Pieles* (2017).¹²⁷ The film follows a series of disabled and disfigured bodies as they navigate modern society. Throughout the plot Casanova undresses the superficial nature of appearances by demanding that viewers reassess their innate perceptions of bodies that do not resemble their own (Figure 16). Ultimately, Casanova achieves this through presenting a plethora of naked bodies as a means of education; of celebrating unconventional beauty and bodily diversity. This celebration of diversity perfectly reflects the tension between rejecting and accepting abnormal bodies in society, as a point of both fear and fascination. But rather than using these bodies to emphasise otherness, *Pieles* displays nudity to emphasise likeness. Therefore, these abnormal bodies, that initially appear uncanny, are actually corporeal reminders of shared humanity. Here Casanova successfully deconstructs Clark's ideal form by questioning how one body can be considered normal, conventional, or "ideal" in the first place. This artistic shift from the object body to the subject person has been monumentally progressive in terms of cultural responses to accepting, not shaming, bodies that transgress the norm.

¹²⁷ See Eduardo Casanova, *Pieles* (2017; Brazil: Nadie es Perfecto, Premium Cine, 2017) DVD.



Figure 16:

PIELES, dir. Eduardo Casanova. Promotional advertisement featuring cast (2017).

(Photo: IMDB.com)

Conclusion

Nudity is everywhere; both being naked and seeing nakedness are universal experiences. Therefore, uncovering the full extent of medieval nakedness would fill volumes. Within the scope of this thesis, I set out to explore medieval attitudes towards nakedness through a material analysis of the period, and what this treatment of the body in the historical past might reveal about our present selves. Yet, this research also became a study of undressing and re-dressing rituals; of erotic narrative veiling and explicit visual censorship, illustrating gender, abnormal bodies, corporeal gesture and illustrating shame. Undeniably this study revealed that the history of nudity is also the history of the body.

Furthermore, when we fragment the body, we do not see nakedness. The uncovered knee or the exposed thigh is never naked, a shoulder or the foot may be bare, but they are never nude shoulders or naked feet. Thus, this study also evolved into a study of paradox. We see how the body is covered and seen, censured and celebrated, shamed and sexualised; how nudity is a reminder of divine creation, but nakedness depicts damnation. Therefore, nakedness speaks to a deeper meaning within a cultural consciousness and awareness of the body, which in a clothed society will always be problematic. Hence, exploring nakedness in art and literary history involves a process of reflection whereupon we must separate the modern perceptions of medieval nudity as wholly shamed and chaste; as most modern misconceptions are rooted in theological tradition and not historical reality.

Foremost, we can establish that the medieval Church constructed a “religious body” that in turn contributed to the development of an idealised “social body.” Within this presentation of the social body, the medieval body is caught up in the battling forces of concealment and exposure. Here, it is clear that religious and secular authorities had their own

jurisdiction for determining what nudity *actually* meant. Thus, representations of holy bodies and practices within the body politic articulated nakedness as the negotiation between moral attainment and physical transgression; between moral *synn* and corporeal *scamu*. However, the ongoing tensions between social control and individual desire, the increasing availability of vernacular literature and the development of silent reading, reveal this position was not fixed.

This changing visual culture also revealed, how rather like a costume, nakedness has undergone a series of stylised changes of its own; reflecting and challenging what is desirable and accepted within the current milieu. In the Middle Ages alone, we see the unclothed body employed as a canvas for religious legislation, medical education, social discipline, and economic poverty. And whilst these depictions in cultural works do not wholly represent medieval reality, they nevertheless assist with our investigation into the cultural norms and expectations of medieval society. As artefacts from a historical past, they contribute to a plethora of visual and narrative reminders that suggest the concepts of nudity and nakedness are under constant and continuous contemplation.

Understanding this ongoing phenomenon that surrounds nudity is also invaluable in understanding how approaches to the sexual body and the embodiment of desire have also evolved through the ages. From the classical nude to the modern portrait, naked bodies remain at the forefront of larger cultural conversations about gender, sexuality, and the fulfilment of desire. Moreover, responses to the existence of monstrous bodies reveal how nakedness and clothing adopted a relationship of binaries when considering what is human and what is grotesque. Ultimately, the naked body became a tool for exhibiting the deviant form. But in reality, these monstrous bodies represent medieval humanity, and the internalisation of fears concerning morality, sexuality, and civil obedience. Therefore, when studying the naked body in the Middle Ages, we can see the existence of several kinds of bodies; all of which are

operating under various cultural codes that negotiate body and identity. The chapters of this thesis set out to consecutively explore the medieval religious body, social body, and the biological body; whereupon it is observable that medieval attitudes toward the body still shape modern notions of the individual.

So as we look forward to new research and social developments, we can be sure that attitudes towards nakedness and nudity will continue to evolve alongside the cultures that encounter and experience it. Yet in some ways, the modern reader is no better off than the medieval. Many medieval and early modern attitudes towards nudity remain embedded within contemporary life through the image policies on social media platforms, in the depictions of martyred bodies under a new culture of devotion, and in modern responses to embarrassment, eroticism, and artistic expression. Therefore, this research should demonstrate how the role of nudity has shifted substantially throughout this history; and whilst the body continues to shape the intersection between the self and society, this role will undoubtedly continue to shift. As such, it is important to look beyond disciplinary boundaries when approaching the Middle Ages, and consider the mutual benefit of supporting art history with the contextualisation of popular religious and secular narratives. This way, we may fully appreciate the complex nature of medieval nakedness as it has surfaced in the modern world. Nonetheless, the debate over the true meaning of nakedness continues on, and both celebrated and concealed at the centre of this negotiation; the human body in its barest form.

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