

# The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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Johann Joachim Winckelmann and other early founders of the modern discipline of art history hailed the idealized nude—developed in ancient Greece, adopted by the Romans, and subject to imitation and revival ever since—as a superior, “classical,” distinctively Western approach to representing the human body.<sup>2</sup> Such presumptions about the classical nude inform the traditional art historical canon, coloring judgments about other traditions and societies, and distorting our view even of certain eras of Western art history, particularly the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> In spite of some exceptional studies to be discussed below, the tradition of representing the unclothed body in the Middle Ages, when it is acknowledged at all, has been most often reduced to what is considered a typical medieval Christian ascetic rejection of the body.<sup>4</sup>

This simplification is frankly astonishing when one considers the complex, multivalent and inventive iconographic contexts in which full or partial nakedness appears in medieval art: biblical stories featuring Adam and Eve, Susannah and the Elders, David and Bathsheba, the rape of the Levite’s wife, the nakedness of Noah, and the Baptism of Christ, among others; the transcendent suffering body in representations of the lives of the saints and Christ; additional narratives that feature holy figures like Martin and Francis divesting themselves of clothes; the lactating Virgin; baptism scenes; birth scenes; bath scenes; medical miniatures; Sheela-na-gigs; illuminations in legal manuscripts addressing cases of impotence, rape, and adultery; Pygmalion’s statue; Venus and other “pagan idols;” demons; hybrid creatures; anthropomorphized sexual organs worn as badges; souls; the dead; the monstrous races; lovers in romances; personifications of Luxuria, and more. While medievalists have addressed many of these still understudied themes, the sharp focus of individual studies has not necessarily been conducive to broader conclusions. As a result, accounts that treat the nude in medieval art continue to do so in reference to a traditional art historical narrative that only allows nudity in medieval art a narrow range of meaning.

In fact, this largely unexplored category of imagery is one of the most powerful legacies of medieval art. Because the unclothed body is associated with extreme states and emotions—purity, innocence, sacrifice, shame, humiliation, sexual desire—depictions of it invite a particular frisson of identification and discomfort. How and when we adorn or cover our bodies is connected to our social identities, and dressing and undressing therefore figure prominently in rituals that govern changes of status in societies (for example, boy to man, maiden to wife, novitiate to monk, dauphin to king).<sup>5</sup> Such rituals typically have a transitional liminal phase, a moment of non-status that has the potential to be socially disruptive. Rituals use undressing and dressing to create and channel the emotional tenor of this state; they are a mechanism that helps to ensure the reinstatement of hegemonic structures in a regulated process of “aggregation,” or reintegration of initiates into society. This larger anthropological significance of nakedness is worth keeping in mind when pondering the rich meanings of the medieval nude (a term that some would currently consider an oxymoron). Representations of nudity in the Middle Ages have the greatest interpretive potential, and they promise to help us define and understand our own relationship to the body, and the related issue of our humanity, in a nuanced form that factors in a historical dimension. Our exploration of the meanings of nudity in medieval art is an aspect of other broader interdisciplinary concerns, such as the history of the medieval body, or the corollary study of the history of dress in the Middle Ages, and it draws upon and extends these scholarly discourses. When we recharacterize the nude in medieval art, we also shift the meaning of nudity in larger art historical narratives that even now privilege select aspects of the Mediterranean cultures of Greece and Italy at the expense of other traditions and cultures.

Given the complexity, importance and richness of this body of material, no single volume on the subject can hope to claim comprehensiveness. The present volume is the first collection devoted to the nude’s role in medieval visual culture, though there are several fine interdisciplinary volumes that address the topic of medieval nudity.<sup>6</sup> Worth singling out is *Naked before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by Benjamin Withers and Jonathan Wilcox, which offers a catalogue of nude images from a culture rarely associated with such representations, and which situates them in legal, literary, religious, political, and artistic contexts. In her introduction to the volume, Suzanne Lewis considers the ways in which “the history of the body has emerged essentially as the shifting ‘representation’ of the embodied self in discourse analysis and textual deconstruction,” as well as the “inherent tensions between cultural constructions of the body and phenomenological embodiments of experience.”<sup>7</sup> She offers the volume as “a stunning realization” of Anglo-Saxon culture’s “self-consciousness and awareness of the body’s paradoxical nature.”<sup>8</sup> We have yet to realize the interpretive potential of studying representations of the unclothed body more generally in medieval culture. Our volume will pursue related questions within broader geographical

and chronological perimeters, but it will concentrate on the particular import of nudity in medieval art through the disciplinary prism of art history. Our art historical interrogations, however, intersect with broad interdisciplinary concerns that converge on notions of subjectivity and of the social meanings of the unclothed body in different cultures. This introduction has several purposes: 1) to briefly interrogate the terminology of “nakedness” and “nudity” – which is charged in art history – with regard to medieval art; 2) to sketch the larger art historical narratives that inflect our current understanding of nudity in medieval art; 3) to offer a survey of scholarship that addresses nudity in medieval art and key issues that it raises; and finally, 4) to briefly situate the essays in this volume within these larger historiographical frameworks.

Thus far, I have essentially treated the words “nude,” “naked,” and “unclothed” as more or less interchangeable. My decision to do so requires careful consideration, because these words have taken on particular significance in art historical discourse since the publication in 1956 of Kenneth Clark’s influential *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. I do not pretend to resolve the issues that swirl around the selective use of these synonyms, and, in fact, the authors in this volume alternatively draw upon, alter or reject his language and precepts. It is proper that individual authors define terms in the ways that will be most instructive given the demands of their own particular material, questions, and approaches. Nevertheless, I hope that making the case here to apply these terms less discriminately will help to elucidate their ideological and historiographical implications, paradoxical as that may seem.

Clark’s distinction between “naked” and “nude” gave art historians a vocabulary with which to circumvent deep tensions between the historical and aesthetic, the objective and subjective, which are embedded in the origins of our discipline, and which are especially troubling when contemplating a representation of a nude body.<sup>9</sup> Unlike his influential predecessor, Johan Winckelmann, Kenneth Clark took the step of openly acknowledging and accepting the frisson of eroticism and empathy that looking at certain renderings of unclothed human beings typically engenders. But, by naming it, Clark aimed to minimize and neutralize this reaction in favor of an aesthetic response. “To be naked,” Clark famously wrote, “is to be deprived of 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. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in what is perhaps his second most famous quote, he avers that “No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling ... if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals. The desire to grasp and be united with another human is so fundamental a part of our nature that our judgment of what is known as ‘pure form’ is inevitably influenced by it, and one of the difficulties of the nude as a subject for art is that these instincts cannot be hidden.”<sup>11</sup> Once the “difficulties” of residual nakedness are acknowledged,

Clark implies, the viewer can progress to the appreciation of the “pure form” that the nude represents.<sup>12</sup>

Clark’s categories of “naked” and “nude,” however compelling, pose a range of interpretive problems; especially relevant here are the implications for feminist art historians and for interpreters of medieval art and other artistic traditions that Clark names “alternative conventions.”<sup>13</sup> Feminist scholars have pointed out that artists have typically fashioned nude female bodies as passive, eroticized objects of the male gaze, and male bodies into active representations of power that reinforce patriarchy.<sup>14</sup> Post-colonialist scholars show that the “nude” inscribed whiteness as a key marker of dominant Western European societies, and that representations of the bodies of the racialized “other” operated to reinforce Western European hegemony.<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Clark, who wrote before such critiques problematized the ideological implications of the traditional art historical canon, certainly saw the idealized nude as a Western European triumph. In the first paragraph of *The Nude*, Clark asserted that the word “nude” was “forced into our vocabulary by critics of the early eighteenth century in order to persuade the artless islanders that in countries where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Clark asserted, “in the greatest age of painting, the nude [as defined by Clark] inspired the greatest works of art.”<sup>17</sup> The unavoidable implication is that medieval works, as well as Asian, Native American, African, and other artistic traditions cannot but be inferior.<sup>18</sup> These troubling implications have led art historians and artists not only to critique Kenneth Clark’s notion of the heroic nude but to seek alternative modes of viewing and representing the unclothed body in art. It is worth noting, however, that in spite of quite a bit of scholarly retooling since Clark’s book, his terms are still persistent and pervasive in artistic training and practice and in the popular imagination, no doubt due in part to the enormous success of Clark’s television broadcasts.<sup>19</sup>

In his own televised rejoinder, John Berger went so far as to reverse the values that Clark attributed to the terms “naked” and “nude,” as he demonstrated in his analysis of Rubens’ painting of *Hélène Fourment in a Fur Coat* (1630s) (Figure I.1a).<sup>20</sup> This painting, according to Berger, is an “exceptional painted image of nakedness,” one that “contains time and its experience,” where “the moment of total disclosure has been transcended.” It “admits subjectivity,” and introduces an element of banality required to “distinguish between voyeur and lover.” And yet as Berger himself remarks, “Her body confronts us, not as an immediate sight, but as experience—the painter’s experience.” Both the painter’s experience and the audience’s experience are privileged here, not Hélène Fourment’s. Any subjectivity she appears to have revealed is constructed by Rubens; this image expresses his (and perhaps our own) desire to access, enjoy, and possess her *self*. Berger’s analysis expresses the desire to find examples that avoid the objectification involved in viewing and possessing a representation of another human being—objectification that is intensified when the subject is shown without the protection of clothing



I.1a (left)  
Peter Paul  
Rubens, *Hélène  
Fourment in  
a Fur Coat*,  
1638. Vienna,  
Kunsthistorisches  
Museum.

(Photo: public  
domain; [http://  
commons.  
wikimedia.  
org/wiki/  
File:Peter\\_Paul\\_  
Rubens\\_019b.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_Paul_Rubens_019b.jpg))

I.1b (right)  
Hans Memling  
(attributed), *Eve*,  
1485–90. Vienna,  
Kunsthistorisches  
Museum.

(Photo: Erich  
Lessing/Art  
Resource, NY)

that is ordinarily required in Western societies. Eunice Lipton attempted to counter the dominant male gaze of the artist by writing from the point of view of Manet's famous model, Victorine Meurent—though, in my view, her account suffers from problems of wishful projection similar to Berger's.<sup>21</sup>

Margaret Miles shares Berger's desire to discover authentic subjectivities in pictures, and her work is of particular interest here because she is one of the few who has attempted to test Clark's widely accepted dichotomy of nudity/nakedness with regard to medieval art. In an illustrative example, she objects to Clark's interpretation of a painting of *Eve* (1467) attributed to the workshop of Hans Memling (Figure I.1b). Clark finds this painting lacking because it does not conform to what he identified as canonical

proportion: A female nude was to have “the same unit of measurement for the distance between the breasts, the distance from the lower breast to the navel, and again from the navel to the division of the legs.”<sup>22</sup> He complains that here the oval of her body “has grown incredibly long,” the spheres “distressingly small,” noting that the “navel is exactly twice as far down the body as it is in the classic scheme.” Miles’s response to Clark is worth quoting at some length:

Eve’s rounded and elongated belly might, for example, have represented—to the painter as well as to his immediate audience—the womb from which all humans were born. It might in addition have evoked her association with the Virgin Mary, the second Eve, from whose womb Christ took human flesh, an association strengthened by the exposure of Eve’s left ear, in which, as legend has it, Mary conceived by the holy spirit. The ear, painted in greater detail than other parts of Eve’s anatomy, as well as her small mouth and breasts—those ‘spheres’ which Clark finds ‘distressingly small’—each contribute to a subordination of sensuality and sexuality that historical painters of nude subjects found necessary to ensure the communication of a primarily religious, rather than erotic, message. Memling’s Eve is not, then, ‘nude,’ but naked. Her body, through its ‘small imperfections,’ reveals her religious significance as mother of all the living. Thus, ‘the nude’—the reconstructed naked body—will not be as useful for my purposes as will representations in which the ‘naked’ body is still evident, in which both subjectivity and religious meaning are expressed by the body.<sup>23</sup>

Miles’s insightful revision of Clark raises some perplexing questions. Whose “subjectivity” is expressed in Eve’s body? How is it expressed? Does turning her body into a theological lesson express Eve’s hypothetical subjectivity? If Miles means the viewer’s subjectivity, can we assume that the embodiment of the religious meaning of Eve would touch male and female subjects in the same way? Did sensuality have to be “subordinated” in order to ensure a religious meaning, as Miles argues?

Eve was, in fact, associated in the minds of contemporaneous viewers with carnality, and she is shown with long flowing hair, which was typically associated with sexual availability.<sup>24</sup> She has smooth creamy skin and a swelling belly, the latter feature identified by Anne Hollander as the primary trait for female attractiveness in this period.<sup>25</sup> Eve draws attention to her sex by deliberately positioning the fig leaves with her hand. According to Nanette Salomon, this gesture, in which we are directed to the woman’s pubis that we are not allowed to see, reduces her “in a humiliated way to her sexuality.”<sup>26</sup> This complex dialectic between corruption and beauty, between sin and desire, appears in earlier representations of Eve, as Karl Werckmeister has pointed out in his discussion of the famous Eve fragment from Autun.<sup>27</sup> Werckmeister makes clear that the “antagonistic structure of the figure cannot be directly viewed as an action or a state of mind of the biblical person represented.”<sup>28</sup> Rather, “it is the manner of conceiving the representation which is antagonistic”; thus he thinks the right questions to ask are historical, “how was a figure in which sexuality appeared in this

particular qualification, to be seen within the penitential portal, by those who were to identify with it as the Biblical prototype of their own state as sinners?"<sup>29</sup> These images of Eve are clearly not "naked" in the positive sense that both Berger and Miles seem to be trying to establish as an alternative to Clark's brand of the constructed, heroic, mildly eroticized, "re-formed" nude. Even if we accepted the debatable argument that sexual meaning was consciously de-emphasized in the Memling, it seems to me that the operations of re-forming a body to express a classical ideal and re-forming a body to express a theological idea are quite similar operations: they both have the effect of further objectifying it.

In fact, like any representation, the nude embodies, manifests, personifies, *objectifies* the ideas and attitudes projected upon it by its creator(s) and/or viewer(s). Objectification is an inevitable part of the process of art-making and viewing, and it could be argued that when we overlook or deny this operation, we grant an unseemly amount of power to the work of art, with the result, sometimes, that we allow ourselves be objectified through it.<sup>30</sup> If representing the "naked" and the "nude" both objectify, then perhaps it is misleading to make such a point of distinguishing between these terms, especially since the distinction inevitably evokes Clark's Eurocentric precepts. As Judith Butler proposes, we can interrogate and defuse "troubling" terms through reuse that is "no longer in a foundational mode."<sup>31</sup> I am skeptical that it is at all possible to represent "authentic" nakedness, at least in the elusive non-objectifying sense that Berger and Miles seem to mean. This does not at all mean, however, that nudity in art is necessarily negative or ideologically reprehensible, even though, historically speaking, this has often been the case. How to make the most of the expressive potential of the human body in art, how one represents the form that viewers are most drawn to, most likely to identify with, or to react against and to recoil from, is a primary problem for contemporary artists.<sup>32</sup> Whether they incorporate or reject the figure in their work, artists must always contend with the force of the art historical tradition that has focused on the figure, as well as constantly confront the images of iconic historical nudes and their pop culture doppelgangers, which are infinitely reproducible and omnipresent in our media-saturated culture.

The long-neglected medieval nude thus has the potential to revise our relationship to the art historical narrative. This is made explicit in a review of Mitchell Merback's ground-breaking study of the near-naked tortured bodies of the two thieves in medieval Crucifixion scenes, a review written not by a medievalist, nor even an art historian, but by Richard Schechner, founder of the Performance Studies Department at New York University, and artistic director of numerous prominent performance troupes (Figure I.2). Schechner perceives that "a book like Merback's signals a paradigm shift in how 'the body' figures in art history and performance theory and practice. Less than a half-century ago, in Kenneth Clark's 1956 classic, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 'the body' was presented as graceful, static, or in

repose—meant to be regarded in a detached manner, abstractly, as a sign of transhistorical beauty.”<sup>33</sup> Schechner proposes parallels between Merback’s analysis of the thieves’ abject bodies from the Middle Ages, and twentieth-century images of the body “illustrated by photographs of bodies torn by war, emaciated in concentration camps, piled thousands upon thousands in mass graves ... taken together, all this contradicted what the viewer of ‘the nude’ was supposed to get from regarding ‘the body.’ ‘The nude’ was not meant to arouse, disgust, terrify, or warn.”<sup>34</sup> Merback’s study of medieval art helped Schechner argue that the representation of the abject body should not automatically be perceived as a rejection of the body—not in the Middle Ages and not in the twenty-first century, a point that has also been made eloquently by the medieval historian, Caroline Walker Bynum.<sup>35</sup> This is a notable departure from the standard narrative of medieval Christian attitudes towards the body as represented in art; furthermore, Schechner’s engagement with Merback’s text shows the extent to which depictions of the medieval nude can contribute to current and pressing artistic dialogues.<sup>36</sup>

Given Schechner’s particular interests, it is understandable that he is inclined to emphasize the parallels between medieval and modern reactions to horrific images of human suffering inscribed on vulnerable, naked human bodies. But Merback’s study also explores the differences between the modern impulse to recoil from such representations, and the medieval tendency to embrace them, identify with them, and internalize them. If modern artists are wary about the dangers of aestheticizing the suffering of victims, medieval artists deliberately developed a wide-ranging and sophisticated artistic vocabulary for doing just that.<sup>37</sup> This crucial difference in attitude explains why many performances by body artists who explore these ideas are shocking and/or distasteful to mainstream sensibilities—edgy, liminal, and potentially subversive—while graphic representations of medieval suffering generally reinforced mainstream views that were based in hegemonic judicial and religious structures, as Merback shows.<sup>38</sup>

It was not the bodies of the thieves but the body of Christ that was at the center of medieval Christian iconography. In the early Middle Ages, Saint Jerome established Christ’s nude body as a model of virtuous humility and poverty, meant to invite imitation by devout Christians.<sup>39</sup> This theme was particularly evident in the art of the Franciscans, who promoted the previously obscure iconographic theme of the “stripping of Christ,” which Anne Derbes has shown allowed a “visual justification of the vow of poverty” that is so essential to the identity of the order.<sup>40</sup> It is revealing that in Franciscan iconography this message was most frequently made through Christ’s body, and not Francis’s body—especially considering that Francis’s legend reports that the saint repeatedly stripped in public in order to exult holy poverty.<sup>41</sup> Apparently it was Christ’s and not the saint’s unclothed body that was thought to have had enough authority to shore up the controversial poverty at the core of Franciscan identity.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore significant that in most representations of Francis’s stigmata he is shown heavily draped, with



only a rent in his robe to reveal his homologous side wound, in sharp visual contrast to the semi-nude seraphic Christ appearing to him.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in certain Franciscan miracle scenes that typically show nudity—the woman exorcised of demons, the healing of the cripple—Francis is decorously enrobed, in strict contradistinction to his bared beneficiaries. The Franciscan example shows us the way in which images of Christ's unclothed body might be used in the service of the ideological needs of a particular group or social category. Indeed, Christ's exemplary poverty co-exists with other possible theological and social meanings given to Christ's nude or semi-nude body as portrayed in countless medieval and Renaissance infancy and Passion scenes.

Leo Steinberg surprised the scholarly community and beyond by addressing the "*ostentatio genitalium*" of Christ; he noticed what generations of art historians schooled themselves not to see, that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works of art used an array of visual strategies to emphasize the penis of Christ.<sup>44</sup> He read "the new genital emphasis as an imaginative reintegration of the sexual into the ideally human, the projection upon Christ of a sexuality which—in him as in the First Adam anterior to sin—exists without guilt."<sup>45</sup> The phallogocentric Christ acknowledged "sex as participant in that human nature which the Incarnation espoused." Though Steinberg sees this visual convention as a distinctly Renaissance phenomenon, he recognizes that it comes out of a "progressive denuding" of Christ's body, which he believes begins ca. 1260 when the Christ child's legs began to be exposed in Tuscan painting.<sup>46</sup> Following Steinberg's book, a number of pre-Renaissance examples of the *ostentatio genitalium* have come to light.<sup>47</sup> We can see the fifteenth-century development of *ostentatio genitalium* as a culmination of a longer process still, in which the pronounced Christian desire to give material human form to the godhead eventually overcame the earliest Christians' initial reluctance to picture Christ at all. The desire to perceive the divine with the bodily senses also manifested itself in the later Middle Ages in the debate about whether mystics saw with their bodily eyes the holy face that they envisioned, and whether it was appropriate to figure the Trinity in art, which some theologians maintained was wrong-headed.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, Steinberg's revelatory observations about Christ's exposed body in Renaissance art are readable in light of the desire to see God, all of him, which intensified in the later Middle Ages, and which may be attributed in part to competing models of the mechanisms and implications of sight that took hold in university circles and beyond.<sup>49</sup> Recent scholarship has begun to make the link between the currency of these contradictory and complex theories and late medieval artistic choices.<sup>50</sup> The theories ranged from the Platonic/Augustinian position that focusing on the changeable and deceptive material world distracted one from proper contemplation of the ideal/spiritual, to the position, influenced by Aristotle, that attributed greater value to our ability to perceive the truth with our senses, taken up by Ibn al-Haytham (Alhacen), Roger Bacon, and other theorists, to the more limited empiricism voiced by William of Occam and the nominalists. That there was (and is) no consensus

concerning the relationship between universals and human perception means that material images of the divine were (and are) layered with philosophical, theological, ethical, and (inevitably) social dimensions. It is not a surprise then, as Steinberg points out, that the insistence on the corporeality of the nude Christ could engender mixed reactions at the time of their creation as well as in “modern oblivion.”<sup>51</sup>

In anthropological terms, Christ’s body was a dominant symbol, a motif used to communicate an official and consistent hegemonic message, but which is so potent that it comes to absorb into its “meaning-content most of the major aspects of human social life.”<sup>52</sup> As such, Christ’s body indexed troubling discrepancies and contradictions, and it was the focus not only of hegemonic powers, but also of diverse individuals and groups across the social spectrum. Taking this into account helps to negotiate the high-profile debate about the implications of Christ’s nude body for our understanding of late medieval sexuality and gender that arose between Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum.<sup>53</sup> Bynum objected to Steinberg’s argument that Christ’s “humanation” depended on his being shown “as fully male in gender and sexuality.”<sup>54</sup> She argues that such a reading does not allow for the findings of her own ground-breaking research, which reveals that some medieval people interpreted Christ’s body as female, and that the boundaries between male and female identities were often blurred in mystical experiences.<sup>55</sup> She concludes that “medieval artists and devotional writers did not either equate body with sexuality or reject body as evil;” instead, she sees medieval art and theology as providing a model for “seeing the body as generative,” which supplies symbols that “give dignity and meaning to the suffering we cannot eliminate and yet fear so acutely.”<sup>56</sup> In his rebuttal, Steinberg sticks to his guns and champions his visual evidence over Bynum’s textual evidence.<sup>57</sup> He writes, “because Christ was born male, and because the male body’s status as paradigm remains axiomatic for Renaissance culture, I suggested that the penis restored to the sacred body after centuries of denial signified the sexual potential as such—not to exclude the female, but to acknowledge sex as participant in that human nature which the Incarnation espoused.”<sup>58</sup>

Both Steinberg and Bynum emphasize the official, conscious, theological meanings of the flesh of both Christ and Mary as represented in medieval and Renaissance art—though Steinberg does question some of Bynum’s claims that representations of penises and breasts likely did not elicit sexual responses from medieval viewers.<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that Bynum’s arguments about the theological, rather than the sexual, meaning of both Christ’s penis and Mary’s breasts (and Christ’s side-wound-as-breast), are echoed in Margaret Miles’s investigations of representations of “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast” and her larger history of the breast as symbol.<sup>60</sup> Miles argues that over a period of several centuries the breast went from symbolizing “physical and religious nourishment” to being limited to meanings that were “medical and erotic.”<sup>61</sup> Miles denies the possible sexualized response to the Virgin’s breast in the Middle Ages, and Steinberg is at least uneasy about addressing such

a response to Christ's newly exposed genitals, stating that: "If personal or subconscious drives motivated this or that artist in his approach to the Christ theme, these drives were ultimately subordinated to his conscious grasp of the subject, since the treatment he accorded the subject must be compatible with the liturgical function that the work was to serve—often as a commissioned altarpiece in a place of public worship."<sup>62</sup> And yet, if we consider Christ's body as a dominant symbol in the Middle Ages (surely Mary's body was also such a symbol), one that holds within it "most of the major aspects of human social life," then why should we not investigate the implications of the potential sexual meanings of such representations? Sexual experience and identity are surely among the major aspects of human social life. If we use the dominant symbol as an interpretive model, we can see that medieval representations of sacred flesh can subsume both Steinberg's and Bynum's meanings, and more besides.

Already some scholars have begun to traverse the territory that Steinberg found "disquieting."<sup>63</sup> Richard Trexler traces a variety of evidence of medieval responses to Christ nude on the cross, noting that medieval men and women perceived Jesus' crucified body as "a volume to be penetrated by audiences," whether it was Rupert von Deutz's dream of passionately kissing Christ on the mouth, or the oft-expressed medieval desire to enter through the side wound or exchange hearts with Jesus.<sup>64</sup> He documents instances in which representations of Christ's body were manipulated in order to make them more masculine or more feminine according to the desires of the viewers; he also notes texts that suggest the church may have had reason to fear that medieval viewers would have been moved to mock Christ's full frontal nudity, or, alternatively, to be sexually aroused by it. An intriguing example of a text that expressed fear that the naked Christ represented on the Crucifix would trigger carnal feelings in viewers appears in a Carthusian miscellany in which the author worries that the bared limbs of Christ exposed on Crucifixes would incite sexual desire.<sup>65</sup> Medieval artists even offered up isolated parts of Christ's nude body in order that the tortured parts might be worshipped, even fetishized.<sup>66</sup> When the side wound is presented this way, it resembles a vagina, and as uncomfortable an idea as this is for many modern people, it was not out of keeping with the flexible way that medieval devotional texts and practices treated gender, as Martha Easton and Flora Lewis have observed.<sup>67</sup> Martha Easton shows that representations of the bared body parts of tortured female saints similarly allowed viewers to alter or blur gender identities and/or to channel or transmute sexual desires.<sup>68</sup> Representations of the suffering bodies of male saints could also elicit complex sexual responses from men and women, as has been addressed in the work of Robert Mills.<sup>69</sup> But because representations of Christ lent themselves to appropriation by medieval viewers who might hold flexible, alternative and sometimes transgressive attitudes about sex and gender, we should not forget that the normative meaning of Christ's naked or near naked body—whether it was masculinized or androgynous—instated and reinforced the frequently

repressive patriarchal and heterosexist structures of medieval society. It was only because it was so powerful in this respect that it became a logical vehicle for interactions that had the potential to subvert or circumvent hegemonic norms.

Images of Christ's exposed body functioned in the same complex and potent way when it came to defining and enforcing other social categories such as class and creed, while at the same time providing a mechanism for nuance and transgression. James Marrow has demonstrated the creative cross-fertilization between Passion tracts and illustrations of Christ's life—in which the most dramatic scenes of Christ's birth, torture, death, and resurrection often picture him unclothed.<sup>70</sup> These Latin Passion tracts were disciplinary, as Thomas Bestul shows; they were meant to control Passion worship, to enforce orthodoxy and combat heresy.<sup>71</sup> The vernacular tracts could certainly function the same way, except that, as Sarah Beckwith observes, late medieval "vernacular texts are felt to be deeply threatening because they made fragile the clerical monopoly of that body [of Christ], as well as the language through which it was mediated."<sup>72</sup> If vernacular texts could do this, how much more threatening might pictures be, which could make Christ's body available to the majority who could not read any language? Like the texts that Beckwith analyzes, pictures of Christ also depicted the "fiction of a body sacredly and simultaneously closed and open: open enough to let in newcomers, closed enough to maintain the integrity of a distinctive group."<sup>73</sup>

Late medieval representations of the Passion that increasingly accentuated the pathos of Christ's bared suffering body in the later Middle Ages have received a fair amount of art historical attention, with emphasis on identifying the origins of the emotional, illusionistic style associated with the Renaissance and later art historical periods, as well as on their iconographic, theological and liturgical contexts.<sup>74</sup> But art history lacks broad studies about the social impetuses and implications of the material images of Christ's body comparable to those that address literary images of Christ in medieval devotional literature and public performances.<sup>75</sup> Even though representations of Christ must have been contingent on socio-historical factors, it is nevertheless difficult to make direct connections between such images and social behavior.<sup>76</sup> Through several illustrative case studies, R.N. Swanson concludes that images associated with Passion devotion seem to be idiosyncratic and inconsistent in their implications for social action.<sup>77</sup> Surely we cannot identify such patterns, if they existed, without a great deal more study of individual instances. Jeffrey Hamburger's work has given us suggestive case studies that sensitively describe the unusually intimate extra-liturgical relationship that certain nuns and devout laywomen in Flanders and Germany forged with the body of Christ through their images.<sup>78</sup> These images often included memorable nudes, such as we find in the *Rothschild Canticles*, where a woman, presumably the *sponsa*, or allegorical bride of Christ, aims her phallic spear to the other side of the bifolium where a nude Christ holding a whip points to his gaping and bloody side wound. Although Hamburger acknowledges

that such images appear in social contexts in which women were constrained within the limits of strict patriarchal structures, his objective is more to reconstruct the women's interior lives through images than to understand the way that such images may have reflected and reinforced the mechanisms of patriarchy. The question is greatly complicated if we consider the possibility, as some commentators have, that the book was intended for or available to both male and female viewers—that a variety of possible reader responses might both “reinforce and evade a binary gender system.”<sup>79</sup> And yet, such transgressive opportunities were typically framed or interspersed with more implacable reminders of the social order. The unicorn page in the *Rothschild Canticles* can be understood, as Jeffrey Hamburger avers, as “an allegorical representation of mystical conformation with Mary and with Christ”—but this interpretation does not fully explain the enigmatic miniature, as he acknowledges (Figure I.3).<sup>80</sup> The liminal ecstasy of the cavorting nude virgin who joyfully greets the grinning Christological beast is quickly contained in the lower register of the folio, where the maiden is now decorously clothed and in the presence of the king. The king exhibits the trappings of his class from crown to falcon, and his regal mount lifts its right leg in a direct parallel to the unicorn-Christ above. The ruler oversees his servant who lances the animal, and the unicorn's blood fills a bucket in the margin, which was, according to the narratives that Hamburger identifies for us, used to dye a wondrous robe for the king in the traditional royal purple.<sup>81</sup> The miniature thus alludes to a spiritual economy designed to foreground and bolster the power of the ruling classes, and which tended not to encourage the faithful to seek or claim the sort of direct relationship with the divine that might supersede earthly hierarchies. In fact, the recent scholarly focus on the role of affective imagery in personal devotional practices seems to have eclipsed scholarly attention to the ideological work that material images of Christ's body performed in the service of dominant institutions.<sup>82</sup> The enormous quantity of Christ images, and the complicated and inventive ways Christ's unclothed body was made to function in the hegemonic discourse, makes this line of inquiry an essential and understudied component of understanding late medieval visual culture, and a fertile area for further research.<sup>83</sup>

Certainly, medieval representations of the unclothed Christ, like the Passion tracts to which they were related, projected Christian hegemony through defining the “otherness” of minority populations.<sup>84</sup> They could be virulently anti-Jewish, for example, through the juxtaposition of depictions of Christ's frail, denuded, tortured body with stereotyped Jewish tormenters that incited intolerance, hatred, and violence against Jews.<sup>85</sup> This juxtaposition had the potential to inflame in Eucharistic contexts that explicitly equated Christ's body with the host, thus evoking the recurrent accusations against Jews of desecrating hosts that could lead to bloodshed.<sup>86</sup> Whether and when such representations actually influenced social actions is sometimes difficult to pin down, but it is clear that even in places like England where the Jews had been expelled, anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic visual rhetoric was a part

of late medieval Passion piety.<sup>87</sup> The ubiquity of these sorts of defamatory visual conventions meant that deviations from the theme would be striking and therefore particularly effective in conveying alternative messages, such as the value of a degree of social cooperation among Jews and Christians or the “idealization of subjection to Christian hegemony,” in Nina Rowe’s apt phrase.<sup>88</sup> Such messages were not only directed toward Jews, but toward the Christians who might be tempted to stray from canonical teachings and social norms. It has been suggested that representations of the perceived Jewish “threat” to the body of Christ could project displaced anxieties about and/or hostility towards a variety of perceived “otherness” in Christian society.<sup>89</sup> It is clear that when we consider how specific representations of Christ’s naked body functioned as a dominant symbol, we should consider its relationship to representations of other actors in the scene, and that we need to reconstruct, as much as possible, the social milieu in which such images operated.

In fact, the sacred bodies of Christ, Mary and the saints were routinely juxtaposed with representations of nudity in a way that is disconcerting to many modern viewers. What are we to make of the fact that sobering and/or affective representations of grand religious themes like saintly martyrdoms, the Nativity, Crucifixion, or Last Judgment share the same page or portal with copulating couples, bare-breasted mermaids, naked musicians who blow horns from their anuses, nudes who urinate, defecate and eat their own shit, subhuman naked grotesques who have grinning mouths where their genitals should be? Such common marginal motifs, which have been catalogued and interpreted by Lillian Randall, Ruth Mellinkoff, Michael Camille, and others, depict the human body in a way that is inverse from the heroic, suffering but transcendent sacred flesh of Christ and the saints.<sup>90</sup> These juxtapositions, especially those featuring nudity, picture the vexed relationship in Christianity between the body and the soul, the corporeal and the spiritual, the corruptive and redemptive potential of the flesh, which is articulated most memorably and influentially in the writings of Augustine of Hippo.<sup>91</sup> We have already seen that such tensions infused representations of Eve. When depictions of different kinds of nakedness are brought together in the same context, such as we find in the physical proximity of marginal grotesques to the transcendent flesh of Christ and the saints, it provides a framework through which the medieval viewer could negotiate complicated attitudes about body and identity, which must be explicated on a case by case basis.

It is significant to note that donor figures in medieval art, the avatars of privileged viewers, are almost never naked, and they are always carefully staged in relationship to naked figures that might appear in the same context. They stake out a kind of middle ground between the featured flesh of the sacred and the often contorted and, to our eyes, obscene bodies in the margin. Donors are rarely merged or interwoven with architectural or foliate ornament, as are the bodies of grotesques and hybrids; they tend



I.4 Master of the Life of Mary, *Vision of Saint Bernard*, 15th century. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.

(Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln)

instead to inhabit legible, logical spaces: designated by a pedestal, enframed by an historiated initial, or at least readable in a suggested environment indicated by furniture, architecture or a companion. They are also usually separated through scale or other compositional devices from Christ, Mary, and the saints, especially when the sacred figures are shown exposing their flesh. While donors may be shown aspiring to kiss the bare foot of the Christ child, for example, they do not express the kind of familiarity permitted to Saint Bernard in a painting from Cologne, in which he lays his hand on the nude Christ child's leg in a tender gesture (Figure I.4).<sup>92</sup> His downward glance suggests a privileged view of Christ's genitals, blocked from the viewer's gaze. The Virgin holds the nipple of her bare breast with spread

fingers, as if she has already or is about to express milk into Bernard's eyes or mouth, as reported in his legend. He imitates this gesture in the way he holds open a volume—and the echoed gestures serve to equate the sacred female body with the book, analogous, perhaps, to texts that liken Christ's flesh to parchment and his blood to ink.<sup>93</sup> Here, the Virgin's naked flesh nourishes Saint Bernard, who reciprocates with an intimate gesture of his own toward the nude Christ. This circuit of gestures authorizes the saint to nourish the faithful in turn through his book. In contrast, donors are shown adoring and supplicating, but they are not empowered by the sacred body they adore to take action in the world, as Saint Bernard is here. This example demonstrates the way that the bared body functioned to picture sacred and social hierarchies.

Since medieval books ordinarily functioned like the one in this painting, as ecclesiastical instruments of divine authority, the profanity that proliferated in the margins of medieval manuscripts seems puzzling indeed.<sup>94</sup> Ecclesiastical buildings, equally forceful symbols of the church's power, also frequently contained a bewildering array of such motifs, so much so that Saint Bernard himself famously complained about it.<sup>95</sup> It is possible to see these images as helping viewers negotiate their own status vis-à-vis contradictory medieval attitudes towards the body, as I have suggested above, but this is a speculative psychological function and the medieval church obviously would not have justified them in such terms. The most plausible medieval justification for such images comes from memory theory, so brilliantly explicated in the work of Mary Carruthers.<sup>96</sup> The contorted hybrids constituted "strange" imagery that could arrest the viewer's attention, mobilize the senses and serve as *imagines agentes*—active imagery that could help fix ideas in the memory.<sup>97</sup> Thomas Dale even suggests that the female nudes such as Eve and *luxuria* that begin to appear in the sculpture of Romanesque cloisters were put there as negative "objects of visualization," which allowed monks to exercise their imaginative powers to neutralize the sexual danger of female flesh.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the nude and semi-nude medieval grotesques who often engage in biological escapades that can strike the modern viewer as inappropriate, indecent or obscene—especially in their sacred contexts—operated to reinforce conservative, traditional ideas in the minds of their viewers.

Nudity also played a socially conservative role when combined with representations of the monstrous, a powerful intellectual construct in the Middle Ages that helped define social norms and insider/outsider status.<sup>99</sup> When the supposed monstrous races that were thought to inhabit far away climes were depicted, their degree of nakedness was frequently a marker of how civilized or uncivilized a race was thought to be.<sup>100</sup> The more naked, and the more sexualized, the depiction of a particular race, the more bestial and uncivilized they were understood to be. The most monstrous being in the medieval imagination was Satan, and he was frequently shown nude with oversized genitals, or with a genital mask—



his grotesque body understood as a parody of Christ's transcendent flesh.<sup>101</sup> Margaret Miles has argued that the category of the monstrous might have applied to the female body, which medieval medical theorists believed was the inverse of the male body; for in spite of some controversy over this question, it was widely accepted that it was the male body that was normative and made in the image of God.<sup>102</sup> Thus the biological operations of the female body, particularly the all important function of reproduction, could be represented as monstrous, though this was not always the case, to be sure.<sup>103</sup> It is significant, certainly, that sacred figures such as Christ, the Virgin, or John the Baptist were not thought to have been either conceived or born in the usual way, and belief in divine intervention into their births must have conveyed rejection of aspects of more ordinary human nativities.<sup>104</sup> Certainly, negative or monstrous representations of the reproductive female body, and certain sexualized grotesques from the Middle Ages, likely served to project or underscore the patriarchal and heterosexist terms of the status quo.

Associations of the monstrous with the feminine are a factor in understanding the phenomenon of the Sheela-na-gig, which appeared in the British Isles in the Romanesque period and is related to other exhibitionist figures in medieval art (Figures I.5, 2.2, 4.19). If the genitals, as David Williams observes, are "after the head, the most important index of monstrosity," then the existence of female figures who hold open or otherwise emphasize exposed and overlarge genitals must have played upon viewer preconceptions about what is to be considered monstrous.<sup>105</sup> In fact, a standard interpretation of Sheela-na-gigs is that they were moralizing embodiments of the church's condemnation of lust, and that they visualized the church's negative stance on sexuality in general.<sup>106</sup> This seems an especially logical justification, given that these figures most often appear on ecclesiastical architecture. Nevertheless, this argument is not adequate to the complexity of the images.<sup>107</sup> The social functions of these controversial figures are not at all transparent, and recent work on Sheela-na-gigs has pointed out varying ways in which they were received in specific contexts.<sup>108</sup> Some scholars have shown that these local talismans became symbolically involved in female claims about property and power, and that a Sheela-na-gig could be understood as "a guardian of territories and the custodian of mens' lives."<sup>109</sup> Marion Bleeke's study of the reception of the famous Kilpeck Sheela (Figure I.5) considers the way in which



I.5 Sheela-na-gig, 12th century. Saints Mary and David Church, Kilpeck, Hereford.

(Photo: John Harding and [www.sheelanagig.org](http://www.sheelanagig.org))

this figure complicates notions of boundaries, of interior and exterior, to such a degree that it had disruptive potential; her study is particularly valuable because it considers the corbel as part of a larger sculptural program that operated in a particular social context.<sup>110</sup> It may have been that Sheela-nagigs and other female exhibitionist figures also served apotropaic or fertility purposes, as has been suggested, a function they may have shared with male exhibitionist figures, or other types of imagery that feature disembodied sexual organs in unexpected contexts.<sup>111</sup> The enigmatic Sheela-na-gig provides yet another example in which representations of the nude body were layered with multiple meanings that helped to shape the medieval social imaginary as well as the actual socio-political landscape.

Similar questions can be posed about the medieval corpus of metal badges that depicts an imaginative range of anthropomorphized (and gynomorphized?) sexual organs: a winged bell-wearing penis, a vulva dressed as a pilgrim and wearing a phallic badge, a ship manned by phalluses, a naked female smith hammering out a winged phallus, and a crowned vulva being carried in a litter by walking penises—among over 150 different varieties of secular badges identified in the Netherlands alone (Figures 4.18a–b, 4.19).<sup>112</sup> Jean Baptist Bedaux proposes that such badges functioned as amulets, and given the widespread use of amulets in medieval culture, it is certainly likely that this was the case for many badges.<sup>113</sup> This explanation does not adequately account for the range of imaginative iconography, nor the seemingly whimsical and even narrative character of some of the badges. Malcolm Jones connects some of these to proverbs and word play, and this is interesting in light of the evident importance of inscriptions and pseudo-inscriptions on the badges.<sup>114</sup> That *coquille* is a French word that can refer both to female genitals and to the scallop shell that is the symbol for the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela may help explain the existence of a vulva-as-pilgrim motif of certain badges, for example.<sup>115</sup> Such word play is not unlike the kind of play that Michael Camille identifies as characterizing the interaction between the texts of medieval manuscripts and their marginal imagery.<sup>116</sup> In fact, A.M. (Jos) Koldeweij sees parallels between these secular badges and erotic marginalia in medieval manuscripts, exemplified by the marginal decoration of a *Roman de la Rose* manuscript that features erections, penis trees, and other apparently erotic scenes (Paris, BnF, MS fr 25526).<sup>117</sup> Such themes in secular badges or manuscript margins elude definitive interpretation. Madeline Caviness has argued that the sexually charged grotesques in the famous prayer book of Queen Jeanne d'Evreux—many of which seem full of humor and whimsy to our eyes—might have come across as an intimidating initiation to the virginal young queen on the occasion of her marriage to an experienced bridegroom.<sup>118</sup> Michael Camille suggested that representations of erect penises, trees bearing penis fruit, and other such marginal motifs in the *Roman de la Rose* manuscript discussed by Koldeweij express the proto-feminist fantasies of the female illuminator pictured in the manuscript; Koldeweij dismisses Camille's interpretation, insisting this manuscript presents a "stereotype iconography"

in which the “phallus is clearly meant to ward off danger.”<sup>119</sup> This imagery of isolated sexual organs, strangely analogous to the conventions of depicting detached body parts of Christ and other sacred figures, seems to have served a number of purposes (and cross-purposes): they expressed a brand of bawdy humor akin to that of the *fabliaux*; they provided a space to negotiate the complex interactive relationship between high and low, visual and literate culture, which was also staged in the margins of medieval manuscripts; and they were taken seriously as being able to offer magico-medical results to the stricken. Evidently, such images could cut across the literate, private spaces of reading to public display on hats or clothing, or they might manifest in other unexpected forms, such as drinking vessels and other household utensils.<sup>120</sup> There is at least one case in which disembodied penises appear to have played a starring role in a public mural with a complex political message supporting the Guelph cause against Ghibelline rivals in thirteenth-century Tuscany.<sup>121</sup> With regards to the correct interpretation of such imagery, as Koldeweij acknowledges, “by no means has the last word been said.”<sup>122</sup>

This sort of erotic imagery, if that’s what it was, certainly raises questions about the nature of obscenity in the Middle Ages. It is well known that theologian Jean Gerson railed against “shameful and naked images” (*imaginibus pudendis et nudis*) being sold even on holy days and in sacred spaces, which he felt were corrupting to youth.<sup>123</sup> Koldeweij interprets Gerson’s images as secular badges and/or other amulets or votive figures.<sup>124</sup> Whatever they were, it is clear that nudity and/or erotic imagery in the later Middle Ages was at once a commonplace and time-honored category of representation, which viewers had been accustomed to seeing in the most sacred contexts, and also an opportunity for dissent and transgression, and thus a source of conservative consternation.<sup>125</sup> Both Michael Camille and Madeline Caviness have explored instances of censorship and iconoclasm in medieval manuscripts that make clear that notions of acceptability, decency, and obscenity with regards to representations of nudity were diverse and contested. Although apparently acceptable to the patron who commissioned the *Roman de la Rose* manuscript discussed above, someone, perhaps a later owner, was offended enough by a marginal image of a nun leading a man by a leash attached to his genitals to rub out the man’s oversized organs (Paris, BnF MS fr. 22526, fol. 106r). It was not simply that the viewer objected to exposed genitals, for Camille points out that the iconoclast did not rub out other phalluses pictured in the manuscript, including the eye-catching penises pictured as fruit hanging on a tree in another illustration. Camille shrewdly hypothesized that perhaps it was the threatening specter of a male controlled by a woman that motivated a male viewer to obliterate it.<sup>126</sup> Another possibility is that a viewer sympathetic to nuns perceived this image as a general insult to the female religious. Even the nudity of sacred figures might give offense, as Caviness notes in drawing our attention to an obliterated representation of Saint Agatha, who was martyred by mastectomy. Caviness recognizes that we cannot know if the viewer was offended by the saint’s nudity or her torture; she

even suggests that the image may be a reaction when, perhaps, the image did not protect or cure as expected, an example of the “humiliation of the saints” that Patrick Geary has written about.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps the viewer was titillated by the representation of Agatha’s body, and blotted it out at the suggestion of a confessor, a course of action that Jean Gerson says he would recommend to any of his own spiritual advisees who might be inappropriately stimulated by a “filthy” illustration in a *Roman de la Rose* manuscript.<sup>128</sup>

The erotic is, of course, culturally contingent, and there is always a danger of reading erotic meanings into objects that feature nudity of one sort or another that most medieval people might not have read as erotic at all (Sheelana-gigs? Secular badges?). It is just as possible that our own cultural prism prevents us from seeing the eroticism possible in certain medieval motifs, such as the small-breasted female body with a swelling belly that Kenneth Clark found “distressing,” the gory martyrdom of a saint, or the suffering body of Christ, as discussed above. In her fascinating overview of medieval erotic imagery, Sarah Salih goes so far as to propose that the Crucifixion was “the primary erotic image of the middle ages,” a locus in which “erotic and spiritual affect” elided.<sup>129</sup> Given this erotic undercurrent, how to represent Christ’s genitals must have been a difficult but commonplace challenge for artists; it was a determining factor in the viewer’s experience of the image, and it likely had theological implications. Sometimes artists put discernible emphasis on Christ’s genitals, as observed by Steinberg, but more often they depicted the nude Christ without genitalia, or arranged his body so that his groin was obscured by the angle of his legs. Other inhibitions about representing sex are evident in medieval art. In spite of what seems to us a surprising willingness to represent an array of naked bodies and bodily functions, there was, as Michael Camille points out, an apparent reluctance in the Middle Ages to use nudity as a means of representing sexual pleasure.<sup>130</sup> And this, even though authorities such as Albert the Great identified human sexual relations as exquisitely pleasurable and part of God’s plan.<sup>131</sup> In medical manuscripts that promoted sex as essential to (male) health, in chivalric romances and other contexts, artists typically did not show naked bodies when they illustrated coitus; rather, they indicated the action through strategic rendering of the disheveled bedclothes covering the copulating couples.<sup>132</sup> Naked, copulating couples are unusually depicted in a fourteenth-century *Roman d’Alexandre* manuscript (British Library, Harley MS 4979, fol. 68r), but they are presented in a series of illustrations of the monstrous races (Plate I).<sup>133</sup> The viewer is encouraged throughout the manuscript to identify with the hero, Alexander, who in this miniature stands fully clothed and separated from the couples, wondering in amazement at the strange customs of the exotic peoples who engage in sex in such a way as to reveal them as not fully human; the fact that the women of the marshes pictured were thought to kill their lovers with their embraces further distanced them both from Alexander and from their medieval viewers. The monstrous races in this manuscript are similarly shown as nude, and/or hyper-sexualized by large phalluses (fols. 56v, 72r, 72v, 76), a visual

convention applied more generally in medieval art as a mark of the other. Members of the underclass, too, were thus dehumanized by showing their bodies exposed in ways that the bodies of the enfranchised commissioners and owners of medieval art were seldom if ever shown.<sup>134</sup> The most famous and illustrative example is perhaps the February page from the *Très Riches Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry, where both male and female peasants expose their genitals while warming themselves in front of the fire inside their huts, in contrast to the preceding January page in which the duke and his courtiers are outfitted with exceeding opulence. Michael Camille has demonstrated that representations of pagan idols embodied many of the anxieties engendered both by images in general and the otherness that they could be made to represent; they were nearly always shown naked, and their nudity intensified their negative connotations.<sup>135</sup> It is clear that if nudity could work to invite erotic feelings and other kinds of intense identification, especially in the case of the naked flesh of sacred figures, it could also delineate familiar from foreign, Christian from pagan, and civilized from savage or semi-human.

For this reason, acts of dressing and undressing were particularly charged in medieval representation; furthermore, attention to dress could be used to evoke the body beneath, even though decorum demanded that it could not be shown directly—this is especially the case with the aristocratic body. It is important to remember that the insistence on dress as a means to distinguish among classes in a hierarchical society is not the same as a rejection of the body. The social importance given to clothing meant that artists could signal an extraordinary event by showing a breakdown in the decorum of dress. Diane Wolfthal has shown that visual conventions of rape relied on the depiction of the victim's rent garments and hair in disarray.<sup>136</sup> Exorcism scenes frequently required the removal of clothes before the demonic spirit could be expelled, and the profound transformation that baptism was thought to bring also required novitiates to be shown in a state of undress. The ultimate example of the significance of undressing resides in images of Christ, whose body was shown forcibly stripped of clothes, a key part of the Passion story that emphasized Christ's humiliation, but which also enabled artists to represent and viewers to see the bodily suffering that was thought to enable salvation. Such multivalence demonstrates how inadequate is the stereotypical narrative that posits that medieval people rejected the body in favor of the spirit, and that this attitude was overturned by the lever of Renaissance Humanism.

Medieval artists could render garments in such a way as to eroticize the hidden bodies beneath, thus playing on the allure of the partially revealed, the veiled, which operated in the display of sacred relics familiar to medieval viewers.<sup>137</sup> By the fourteenth century, clothing styles had developed that highlighted rather than concealed the human form. Brigitte Buettnner goes so far as to hypothesize that the representation of this new style of revealing garments was a necessary prerequisite to evoking erotic desire in aristocratic readers, and that they figured in the development of the erotic nude.<sup>138</sup> This ability of drapery to reveal rather than conceal the erotic body may also pertain



I.6 “Adulteress,”  
Puerta de las  
Platerías, 12th  
century. Santiago  
de Compostela.

(Photo: Paula  
Gerson)

to earlier periods, as evident in the form-fitting garment of the so-called “adulteress” on the Romanesque *Puerta de las Platerías* at Santiago de Compostela (Figure I.6).<sup>139</sup> It is interesting to note that the increased attention to the erotic body in the later Middle Ages, especially evident in medieval manuscripts, coincides with increased practice of silent reading, which Paul Saenger suggests might have permitted more opportunity for erotic and subversive thoughts, freer from the restraining influence of reading aloud in the hearing of others.<sup>140</sup> It may be that this new practice defined the space that eventually allowed for the growth of pornography, which is contingent on conditions of consumption, as Sarah Salih notes.<sup>141</sup> Generally speaking, the term “pornography” applies to the private consumption of erotic materials that were created for the purpose of sexual arousal. Salih identifies the Middle Ages as “pre-pornographic,” because explicit sexual imagery was not primarily intended to arouse erotic feelings; furthermore, it existed in a public arena and, viewed collectively in varied contexts, it might evoke a range of

responses: fear, amusement, disgust, aesthetic appreciation, shame, and/or sexual arousal.<sup>142</sup>

As noted by Michael Camille, it may indeed be that medieval culture allowed for more “openness to the visual representation of certain sexual acts,” especially when compared to later periods.<sup>143</sup> In fact, it is this “openness” that led Norbert Elias to posit that medieval culture lacked the shame that he considered to be an essential part of the “civilizing process,” which he argued led to restraint of violent and passionate urges through the institution of more and more exacting social customs and rules of etiquette.<sup>144</sup> Alternatively, Brigitte Buettner has argued that the increasingly elaborate customs of late medieval court culture were an important way that aristocrats distinguished themselves from competing groups in the social arena, and that these sorts of social performances had a significant effect on visual representations.<sup>145</sup> Not only did class become more explicitly inscribed on the body through gestures and dress, but new restrictions on social interactions, particularly between men and women, “called for visual compensations.”<sup>146</sup> Among these was eroticized imagery, and specifically the female nude, which she argues was part of male aristocratic self-presentation that involved constructing a female “other” subject to the male

gaze.<sup>147</sup> Buettner's argument, that representations of "shameless" nudity appeared as a result of a "civilizing process," disrupts Elias's proposed sociological narrative.

Furthermore, Buettner, like Camille, Caviness, and others, points out that there are many aspects of the body and of sexuality that cannot be represented in medieval imagery. By the fifteenth century, she notes a "virtual absence of male looked-at-ness, the erotic display of a male to a female observer," the act of copulation, and "most severely, male homosexual acts."<sup>148</sup> This conclusion, however, leaves out the figure of Christ as the erotic object of a female gaze, and there are surely other counter-examples as well, since medieval imagery has not been subjected to enough scrutiny with regards to these issues to make definitive generalizations. Even so, Buettner's observations help us think about the way that coded images could absorb and convey sexual meanings in place of explicitly depicted sexual activity.<sup>149</sup> Sexualizing the imagined other, the underclass, the monstrous races, the grotesques in the margin, as discussed above, were all forms of this displacement. Visual puns allowed artists to suggest sexual meanings: female genitalia were evoked by small furry animals, baskets, and the like, and male organs by bagpipes, swords, lances, and other instruments that are longer than they are wide.<sup>150</sup> Representing rabbits and monkeys was nearly always a way of alluding to sex without explicitly depicting it. Michael Camille has shown that same sex desire or anxieties related to it could manifest in such strategies, particularly by his analysis of the manuscripts owned by Jean, Duke of Berry; these included an array of phallic and sexual references that Camille argues were tailored to appeal to the duke's sexual appetites, known to extend to men and boys.<sup>151</sup> Diane Wolfthal, too, has identified and analyzed the complex issues involved in some visual allusions to same-sex desire in images by Petrus Christus and the Housebook Master.<sup>152</sup> For the main part, however, art historians have ignored, or, more frequently not seen, what may be disguised visual references to homosexual love and desire, no doubt due to our own socially constructed notions of sexual norms and scholarly appropriateness.

Because the history and historiography of the Middle Ages have been shaped by the dominant culture, we also know much less than we should about non-Christian relationships to pictures in Western medieval Europe. A cursory survey of Jewish medieval manuscripts yields a large number of unclothed bodies, and this material has not received the scholarly treatment it deserves.<sup>153</sup> Jewish images of nudity operated in wholly different interpretive contexts from Christian examples, though they sometimes illustrated the same biblical themes.<sup>154</sup> Both Christian and Jewish manuscripts featured hybrids that were partly human and semi-nude, but scholars have yet to interrogate this evidence to understand medieval notions of the monstrous from the Jewish point of view. The visualization of the monstrous from the perspective of an oppressed minority whom the dominant culture routinely cast as monstrous would surely offer us a fuller understanding of medieval culture as a whole.<sup>155</sup> Marginal figures, such as

a jester whose sagging pants expose his buttocks or the naked horn-blowers hailing an ornamental matsah featured in the central miniature of a folio, seem to echo similar Christian marginal motifs (Plate II).<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, they call for us to consider them with reference to Jewish notions of center and margin, of word and image. As with the case of Christian examples discussed above, nudity in Jewish manuscripts could refer to poverty and deprivation. Such was the case with a nude personification of the nation of Israel illustrating a passage in *Ezekiel* (16:17: "You were naked and bare") in a fifteenth-century Haggadah.<sup>157</sup> The margin in another Haggadah shows a dog offering a robe to a shivering nude man, just above the central miniature showing a cozy *Seder* in a prosperous Jewish home.<sup>158</sup> Connections between nudity, poverty, and charity in Jewish manuscripts surely differed from Christian interpretations of the subject matter. They must be considered in light of the Jewish relationship to poverty and its corollary, wealth, which could not help but be shaped by Christian laws. In Christian realms, Jews could not own land and frequently had reason to fear being uprooted; they were subject to additional taxes; and they were often pressured into economic relationships with Christians that were based in contradictory Christian notions about money, commerce, and usury.

Further comparative study of the treatment of the unclothed body in Jewish and Christian art illustrating rituals or biblical themes featuring nakedness would no doubt be illuminating. For example, nudity seems to have figured differently in Jewish and Christian representations of circumcision, and representations of bathing scenes have much to tell us about differing Jewish and Christian notions of the body and sexuality.<sup>159</sup> Interestingly, representations of Jewish martyrdoms can look strikingly like scenes from the martyrdoms of Christian saints; in both, nudity can play a key role in evoking horror and establishing a strong link of empathy between the viewer and the tortured figure.<sup>160</sup> Jewish images survive mainly in manuscript form, though we cannot rule out the slim possibility that the medieval synagogues that now exist mainly as archeological ciphers might have featured image programs in various media. As the only non-Christian group officially permitted to maintain non-Christian beliefs in Western European Christendom, Jews were often able to establish social conditions conducive to the creation of imagery, in spite of oppression and hardship, and the function of the unclothed body in Jewish imagery is certainly a promising topic of future research.<sup>161</sup>

It is more difficult to identify imagery made by illicit marginal groups in medieval Europe such as pagans and heretics, much less to consider the role of the nude body within such a corpus. In all cases, of course, we have to contend with the vicissitudes involved in the survival of objects, and it seems that nudes in general, especially in secular contexts, were more subject to willful destruction than other categories. We know that the Cuman people of medieval Hungary were considered idolaters by the dominant Christian culture, possibly because they erected statues—perhaps ancestor portraits—over burial mounds.<sup>162</sup> Medieval Christians generally



associated pagan idols with nudity, but we just do not know if the Cuman images featured nakedness.<sup>163</sup> It was typical for non-Christian customs to merge with Christian practices, and the degree to which even later medieval Europe was “Christian” in the strictest sense is a matter of some debate. Pagan beliefs may well have persisted with reference to some of the objects already mentioned, such as secular badges and exhibitionist figures. Diane Wolfthal discusses textual evidence of “magical rape imagery” in which the would-be magician manipulates images made of wax and other materials in order to effect a woman’s eventual sexual submission.<sup>164</sup> Though there appear to be no surviving medieval examples, they might have resembled extant Greco-Egyptian figurines, which are depicted nude.<sup>165</sup> Similar figurines may also have functioned to encourage love, sexual potency, and/or fertility. We have little idea if and how the nude body played a role in the art of those who were officially designated heretics, since any art they might have produced would have been destroyed upon their condemnation. This was the case with the Gugliemites, a sect in Northern Italy that held their leader, Guglielma (ca. 1210–81), to be the female incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the coming age of the Holy Spirit. Trial records reveal that they created a number of images to promote the cult, which were burned along with Gugliemite leaders.<sup>166</sup>

Non-Christians in Latin Christendom included Muslims, who lived as prisoners, slaves, and sometimes as subjects in conquered territories in Spain, Jerusalem, Southern Italy and Eastern Europe. One possibly fruitful area for further research is to consider the response that Muslims living under Christians may have had to the nudes they encountered. Is it possible to theorize the response, for example, of the Muslim prisoner, whom Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy left with the Carthusians at the Chartreuse de Champmol, to the spectacular representations of the mostly nude Christ that proliferated at the charterhouse?<sup>167</sup> How might these semi-nude images have been used in the task of converting him as the duke directed the monks to do? And given that this prisoner had formerly lived according to an aniconic tradition, how might he have reacted to the monks’ insistence that he acknowledge these displays of divine corporeality? The rich Muslim tradition of secular representations of the figure, including erotically charged nudes, is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>168</sup> So too, is the question of the meanings of nudity in Byzantine art, which preliminary studies have already shown to be rich and promising.<sup>169</sup> Comparative studies of all three traditions will no doubt yield insight into the nude’s cross-cultural import.

The naked body, when it does appear in Western medieval art, must be understood as operating in a complex matrix of socially coded meanings: what is revealed is more evident when studied in the context of what is not shown. Images often expose what cannot be said or written down, and they convey some things that can only be pictured. They constitute a valuable resource for understanding a society in which the written sources that survive are overwhelmingly male and clerical. We should not assume, however, that

the verbal responses of an elite cadre of literate ecclesiastics were necessarily characteristic medieval responses to images of the nude body. There was no primary meaning of nudity in medieval art, only meanings, as the essays in this volume demonstrate.

It may be that art historians' emphasis on medieval hostility to representations of the flesh is shaped by the countless headless and limbless antique nudes in our museums, which may or may not have been damaged by zealous early Christian smashers of pagan "idols" like Pope Gregory the Great. In her examination of the survival and reception of the classical nude, Jane Long demonstrates that these statues did not elicit univocal antagonism from the medieval world, as is so often assumed. She analyzes evidence of a medieval appreciation for the erotic and shows how such classical statues operated in discourses that attributed positive values to desire, sex, procreativity, and love.

Kirk Ambrose also shows us that it is a mistake to presume that representations of flesh conveyed only negative associations—that it could even be rendered with positive associations in the male clerical sanctum of the cloister. His examination of the little-studied Romanesque male nude demonstrates that it served as a particularly flexible vehicle to express the piety that was at that time mostly reserved to the elite monks who were the patrons of this kind of sculpture. Ambrose analyzes how Romanesque artists transformed classical precedents in order to help negotiate complex ideas about the body, gender, sin, and piety. The resulting visual dialectic was so powerful, he argues, that it played a role in transforming the artistic landscape through the revival of monumental sculpture in the Latin West.

The male nude could operate to construct gender identities in more secular court contexts, as Elizabeth Moore Hunt demonstrates in her study of the naked *jongleur* in the margins of medieval manuscripts. These gyrating, unclothed figures were strategically placed in manuscripts in order to draw attention to certain aristocratic values written in the texts or pictured in the miniatures. The figures' androgyny enabled them to create a frisson that enabled both identification and contrast for male and female readers, and Hunt shows us how they may have functioned differently for readers of different genders. Her study of the naked *jongleur* illustrates how nudity came to operate as a social signifier in a particular historical milieu, as defined in this case by the users of a group of related manuscripts.

Depicting male nudity presented the problem of whether and how to represent male genitalia, the profound implications of which Madeline Caviness addresses in her study of representations of the nakedness of Noah in medieval art. This biblical story raises what Caviness calls "narrative trouble" and it produced a wide range of visual and verbal glosses about the implications of possessing, exposing, concealing, viewing or averting one's eyes from the male member. Caviness's analysis of a diverse sampling of artistic approaches to the subject challenges persistent notions that medieval artists adhered to standard iconographic types approved by

church authorities. She unearths layers of meaning with which medieval artists imbued this motif, from social concerns about the proper relationship between patriarch and progeny, to homophobia and denigration of the other, to psychoanalytic anxieties about castration and incest. Iconoclastic reactions to some representations of Noah's explicit nakedness suggest that viewer responses to this complicated theme were by no means homogenous. Caviness clearly demonstrates that representations of the unclothed body elicited powerful and various responses from diverse viewers.

That the medieval nude could also elicit diverse responses from the same viewer is further testimony to its complexity, as Martha Easton shows in her analysis of Jean, Duke of Berry's famous prayer book, the *Belles Heures*, illuminated by the talented Limbourg brothers. Here the artists capitalized on the nude's expressive power to appeal to the duke's particular appetites, tastes, and viewing skills. As Easton shows, each instance of nudity in the manuscript offered up different possibilities for response that were nested within the book's larger visual program. Ways of representing dress and undress, physical contact, and the exchange of gazes encouraged the viewer to make meaningful intervisual connections from folio to folio. The reading/viewing process that Easton describes lends itself to multivalent and sometimes paradoxical responses to the nude, which belie standard generalizations about the equation of flesh to sin for medieval viewers.

Sensitivity to the conventions and codes that artists applied to the body helps us to identify how medieval artists could make the nude signify in such diverse ways; these included how artists handled the absence or presence of body hair, as Penny Jolly demonstrates. In medieval societies, the growth of body hair signaled sexual maturity, with connotations about sex, virility, and fertility, and it often had legal implications regarding the age of marriage and inheritance. Rather than seeing this kind of detail as incidental, arbitrary, or a by-product of naturalistic trends, Jolly shows us that body hair was a device that medieval and early modern artists used to convey models and anti-models of masculinity and femininity.

Artists could also introduce complex and nuanced readings of the human body by scrupulous portrayal of flesh, as Linda Seidel argues in her examination of exceptional fifteenth-century representations of Adam and Eve by Jan van Eyck and Hugo van der Goes. She considers the implications of their unprecedented rendering of the physiological details of embodiment, and of visual connections between human flesh and the divinely created world. Seidel further proposes that Jan van Eyck self-consciously rendered the labor of Adam and Eve in such a way as to dignify the labor of the painter. The artistic devices that Seidel studies reveal a more positive attitude towards the body that was not necessarily to be found in standard clerical texts on Adam and Eve. Seidel demonstrates that in these paintings there is an emphasis on human productive and generative potential that resides in the pictorial, even the material, qualities of the works of art, which Seidel shows can be analyzed to retrieve a broader range of cultural meaning than is available in texts alone.

Artists also made significant interpretive decisions when they represented the Baptism of Christ. They had to decide how to picture both divine and human qualities, since this theme called for a juxtaposition of Christ's nude body with those of ordinary humans in states of undress. Véronique Dalmasso's essay explores the various ways in which late medieval Tuscan painters resolved problems such as how to compare the bodies of God and man, whether and how to represent genitalia, and how to evoke the spiritual transformation that baptism was supposed to bring. Dalmasso concludes that the nature of these issues shaped the artists' approach to the human body, and that the new attention to physiognomic detail that she charts in these paintings cannot be fully explained—as has been the tradition in an art history dominated by the mythology of the Renaissance—by the rediscovery of the classical nude.

The display of Christ's body posed more than theological conundrums; it challenged artists to balance issues of decorum with the desire to show the human form at both its most glorious and most abject. The spectacle of Christ's suffering body could not but evoke the human suffering that medieval viewers would have encountered in their daily life, from accident and disease to torture and capital punishment. Corine Schleif points out the hesitance that scholars have shown in addressing late medieval images of the naked adult Christ, and begins to make the case that such images were not as rare as previously thought. She investigates the complicated maneuvers involved for viewers in deciding how much they could or should identify with a suffering God represented in a naked human form—maneuvers that are manifest both in visual representations of the Passion narrative and in the works of medieval writers like Saint Birgitta. That sanctioned texts and images of the Passion used sophisticated strategies to guide audiences away from the kinds of identification that implicitly questioned and implicated hierarchic structures is testimony to their latent potential to subvert those structures. Schleif shows us that the nuances of these multivalent medieval viewing contexts sheds light on analogous operations of spectatorship involved in the horrific images of suffering that permeate our own visual culture.

The nude body operated in so many medieval discourses, both verbal and visual, that it was never a stable signifier, as Diane Wolfthal demonstrates in her analysis of an unusual female nude that came to serve as the frontispiece for a Book of Hours. The prominence in a devotional book of a nude female bather, seemingly presented without any biblical context and only ambivalent moralizing cues, belies standard notions concerning the medieval/early modern Christian rejection of the erotic body. Wolfthal explicates the secular motifs in this painting, and shows how they were reconciled aesthetically and thematically with the larger devotional program of the book. This manuscript interleaves the secular and the sacred, the erotic and the devotional, in ways that modern people often find difficult to resolve. Wolfthal shows us the value in studying objects like this

frontispiece that have too often been neglected, whose existence calls into question the canonical narrative of a medieval rejection of positive classical attitudes towards the nude followed by an Italian Renaissance.

And yet, nudes that resist this narrative abounded, as Paula Nuttall demonstrates in the final essay of this volume. She documents a strong secular tradition of representing the nude in the North, even though much material evidence is lost. She shows that Italian masters like Bellini and Titian, credited with (or blamed for) conceptualizing the erotic female nude as a separate category, were aware of and inspired by earlier experiments by Jan van Eyck and other Northern artists. Nuttall offers an alternative account of the development of the female nude as an independent subject in Western art. Her revision acknowledges not only the role of Italy, but also a prolific Northern tradition, and it recognizes that both North and South drew on a classical tradition that was filtered through medieval precedents.

Our understanding of the role that the nude plays in the art historical canon—with its myriad, profound ideological and aesthetic implications—suffers from the effects of a simplified narrative that leaves out over a thousand formative years. The representation of nudity in the Middle Ages staged multiple discourses about the nature of sexuality, spirituality, sin, virtue, humanity, gender, and the “other.” The medieval tradition shaped the iconography of the nude body in Western Europe, which has exerted such a strong influence on the history of art. A reconsideration of the many, varied and complicated representations of medieval nudity, such as we find in the essays of this volume, will help to shift standard generalizations about medieval attitudes towards the body, which in turn must disrupt larger historical, sociological, and art historical narratives. This volume aims to call attention to the importance of the medieval nude as a category, and to open up a broader dialogue about the meanings of nudity in medieval art.

## Notes

- 1 I presented earlier versions of this essay as the preface to two sessions sponsored by the International Center for Medieval Art that explored the “Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art,” at the 42nd International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI, 2007, and as the Katherine Brown Distinguished Lecture in Art History, Rice University, Houston, March, 2009. This project originated in research that I conducted while supported by a Fulbright fellowship to France in 2004. The major part was written at the Warburg Institute, with the benefit of support I received as Kress Visiting Research Fellow, 2008–2009. I thank Kirk Ambrose, Sarah Salih, Diane Wolfthal, and an anonymous reader for perceptive comments that greatly improved the final version. I am grateful to Knox College for funding to support the illustrations in this volume.
- 2 For Winckelmann’s impact on the history of art, see Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); and his introduction to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. H.F. Mallgrave (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research

- Institute, 2006), 1–53. The words “Western” and “West” are increasingly problematic in a global society, but I retain them here for their current descriptive utility in referring to European powers historically characterized by white, Christian, male hegemony.
- 3 Christopher Hallet has noted that the cultural import of even the Roman imperial nude has been neglected due to its differences with the idealized Greek nude; see his *The Roman Nude: Heroic Portrait Statuary 200 B.C.–A.D. 300* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
  - 4 Typical in this regard are Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 23, 301–3; Michael Gill, *Image of the Body: Aspects of the Nude* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), chap. 2; Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1978), chap. 3; Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “The Nude in the Visual Arts,” in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference/Thomson-Gale, 2007), 1071–76, at 1073.
  - 5 Arnold van Gannep first proposed this model in his *Rites of Passage* (1908; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). It was explored and expanded in the influential work of Victor Turner. See his “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” in *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society for 1964* (Seattle: American Ethnological Society, 1964), 4–20; *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969); *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); and *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). Turner applied this model to Western Christianity in his *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), esp. 147.
  - 6 E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); and *Le Nu et le Vêtu au Moyen Âge (XIIe–XIIIe siècles): Actes du 25e colloque du CUERMA, 2-3-4 mars 2000* (Aix-en-Provence: CUERMA, 2001).
  - 7 Suzanne Lewis, “Introduction: 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 and Benjamin Withers (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2003), 15–28, at 18.
  - 8 Lewis, “Medieval Bodies,” 28.
  - 9 See Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, and Whitney Davis, “Winckelmann Divided: Mourning the Death of Art History,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40–51.
  - 10 Clark, *The Nude*, 1.
  - 11 Clark, *The Nude*, 8.
  - 12 Clark’s position was surely an outgrowth of or response to the Kantian formalist art criticism, exemplified by Clement Greenberg, that was ascendant at the time.
  - 13 Clark, *The Nude*, 300–334.
  - 14 For the most important and thorough feminist deconstruction of Clark’s argument, see Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992). See also Marcia R. Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830–1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 1990); and Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).
- 15 Among many relevant studies, see Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-century America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). For a cogent discussion about the historical implications of the category of "race," see Peter Erickson, "Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance," *Criticism* 35, no. 4 (1993): 499–527, esp. 500–504.
  - 16 Clark, *The Nude*, 1. See Madeline H. Caviness's consideration of Clark's own cultural context in the epilogue to this volume, 321.
  - 17 Clark, *The Nude*, 1.
  - 18 In his autobiography, Clark commented that Roger Fry's lectures had "some strange results" that made "negro art come out at the top, Greek art at the bottom," *Another Part of the Wood: A Self-portrait* (London: J. Murray, 1974), 250.
  - 19 At the time of the writing of this essay, a Google search of "Kenneth Clark Civilisation Syllabus" reveals that Clark's *Civilisation* is still routinely shown in college-level history and art history courses. For the persistence of Clark's ideas in studio courses, see Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik, "Re-Viewing the Nude (in Traditional Genres)," *Art Journal* 58, no. 1 (1999): 42–48.
  - 20 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Penguin, 1972), 61. Cf. Ben Withers, who writes in the forward to his *Naked before God* that "by highlighting a descendant of an Old English word in our title, we do not seek to reverse Clark's binary hierarchy as much as to stress a key component of Anglo-Saxon society, its dependence on its own vernacular, and to acknowledge a continuity between that past and our present," 6.
  - 21 Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (New York: Meridian, 1994).
  - 22 Clark, *The Nude*, 21.
  - 23 Margaret Ruth Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 16.
  - 24 Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and its Alternatives* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43–45.
  - 25 Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 97–98 and passim.
  - 26 Nanette Salomon, "Making a World of Difference: Gender, Asymmetry and the Greek Nude," in *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality, and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*, ed. Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Claire L. Lyons (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 197–219, at 204.
  - 27 Karl Werckmeister, "The Lintel Fragment Representing Eve from Saint-Lazare, Autun," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): 1–37, esp. 28–37.
  - 28 Werckmeister, "Lintel Fragment," 30.
  - 29 Werckmeister, "Lintel Fragment," 30.
  - 30 For a recent interrogation of the complex dialectic between viewing subject and portrait subject with additional bibliography, see Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

- 31 Judith Butler, "The End of Sexual Difference?" in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 414–34, esp. 419–22.
- 32 See, for example, Bostrom and Malik, "Re-Viewing the Nude."
- 33 Richard Schechner, Review of *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, by Mitchell Merback, *The Drama Review* 45, no. 2 (2001): 169–71, at 169.
- 34 Schechner, Review of *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel*, 169.
- 35 Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 1–33.
- 36 For further reflections on the resonance of medieval imagery in our own age, see Michael Camille, "How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art': Medieval, Modern and Postmodern in Meyer Schapiro," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 65–75; and Madeline H. Caviness, "Retomando la Iconografía Vaginal/Revisiting Vaginal Iconography," *Quintana* 6 (2007): 13–37.
- 37 For key perspectives on this vast and complicated subject, see Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 17–34; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Stephen Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); and Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 38 On the social implications of body/performance art, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000).
- 39 For discussion and additional bibliography concerning Jerome's famous phrase, *nudus nudum Christum sequi*, see Ambrose, "Male Nudes," 73.
- 40 Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 138–57.
- 41 Richard Trexler notes that "the fact that the pictures never permit us to see Francis naked, as the written sources say he was, but only with his genitals covered over, deserves exploration;" see his *Naked before the Father: The Renunciation of Francis of Assisi* (New York: P. Lang, 1989), 109. For a rare depiction that shows an entirely nude Francis, including genitalia, see a fifteenth-century illustrated version of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the British Library: Yates Thompson MS 36, fol. 149r.
- 42 For a useful study on this controversy, see David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). For the continuing importance and controversy surrounding the connection of nudity to Franciscan identity, see Franco Mormando, "'Nudus nudum Christum sequi': The Franciscans and Differing Interpretations of Male Nakedness in Fifteenth-Century Italy," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2008): 171–97.
- 43 For surveys of images of Saint Francis, see William R. Cook, *Images of St. Francis of Assisi: In Painting, Stone, and Glass: From the Earliest Images to ca. 1320 in Italy: A Catalogue* (Florence/Perth: L.S. Olschki; Department of Italian of the University of Western Australia, 1999); and Rosalind B. Brooke, *The Image of St. Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



- 44 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd rev. and expand edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 45 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 365.
- 46 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 151.
- 47 Noted in the expanded version of Steinberg's *Sexuality of Christ*, 253–73. For additional examples, see Clifford Davidson, "Nudity, the Body, and Early English Drama," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 98, no. 4 (1999): 499–522, at 505–7. Vida Hull treats the influence of Saint Bridget's *Revelations* on representation of the Christ child in light of Steinberg's argument. She also notes that the nude Christ child predated Bridget's *Revelations*, and therefore we should see Bridget's text as "a literary example of the same interest in the nude Christ child and reference to his genitalia as exhibited in late medieval and Renaissance art;" "The Sex of the Savior in Renaissance Art: The *Revelations* of Saint Bridget and the Nude Christ Child in Renaissance Art," *Studies in Iconography* 15 (1993): 77–112, at 96.
- 48 For an introduction to the medieval debate about seeing God, see Bernard McGinn, "Visio Dei: Seeing God in Medieval Theology and Mysticism," in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 15–33; for a perceptive art historical study on this theme, see Lucy Freeman Sandler, "Face to Face with God: The Iconography of the Beatific Vision Reconsidered," in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the Harlaxton Conference* (Woodbridge, UK; Dover, NH: Boydell Press, 1986), 224–35.
- 49 The growing literature on theories of sense perception in the Middle Ages is too large to fully cite here. Still fundamental is David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). For the profound influence of these theories on medieval intellectual history, see Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology, and the Foundations of Semantics, 1250–1345* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1988); for a thoughtful interdisciplinary study addressing these issues, see Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
- 50 See, for example, Michael Camille, "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 197–223; Cynthia Hahn, "Visio Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality," in *Seeing as Others Saw*, 169–96; Stephen Perkinson, "Pourtraire, Contrafaire, and Engin: The Prehistory of Portraiture in late Medieval France" (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1996); and idem, "Engin and Artifice: Describing Creative Agency at the Court of France, ca. 1400," *Gesta* 41, no. 1 (2002): 51–67; Bret Louis Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 51 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 190–92. See Corine Schleif's additional comments on this matter in this volume, 251–78.
- 52 Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 43–44.
- 53 Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1986): 399–439 (reprinted with minor revisions in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and*

- Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York; Cambridge, MA: Zone Books; Distributed by the MIT Press, 1991), 79–117. Steinberg replied in “Ad Bynum,” a chapter in the revised and expanded version of his book, 364–89.
- 54 Bynum, “Body of Christ,” 84.
- 55 Treated in Bynum, “Body of Christ,” 93–116, as well as her *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), among other works.
- 56 Bynum, “Body of Christ,” 116–17.
- 57 Steinberg, “Ad Bynum.”
- 58 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 365.
- 59 Steinberg, “Ad Bynum,” 381–83.
- 60 Margaret R. Miles, “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast,” in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 26–37; and her *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
- 61 Miles, *Complex Delight*, 14.
- 62 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 105.
- 63 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 104.
- 64 Richard C. Trexler, “Gendering Jesus Crucified,” in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. Brendan Cassiday (Princeton, NJ: Index of Christian Art, 1993), 107–20, at 110. See also Sara Lipton, “The Sweet Lean of His Head: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 80, no. 4 (2005): 1172–208. See further discussion by Corine Schleif in this volume, 251–78.
- 65 For the text, see Jeffrey Hamburger, “The Writing on the Wall: Inscriptions and Descriptions of Carthusian Crucifixions in a Fifteenth-Century Passion Miscellany,” in *Tributes in Honor of James H. Marrow: Studies in Painting and Manuscript Illumination of the Late Middle Ages and Northern Renaissance*, ed. Jeffrey Hamburger and Anne Korteweg (London; Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2006), 231–52, at 251–52. Hamburger does not mention that this text is the same much-quoted text on imagery mistakenly attributed to Jean Gerson, discussed by Sixten Ringbom in his influential article on devotional imagery; see Sixten Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: The Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety,” *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 73 (1969): 159–70. I thank Daniel Hobbins for his help in determining that the text should not be attributed to Gerson, in spite of its appearing in a sixteenth-century compilation of Gerson’s works.
- 66 On the complex issues of real and fictive fragmentation of the body in the Middle Ages, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in its Medieval and Modern Contexts,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York; Cambridge, MA: Zone Books; Distributed by the MIT Press, 1991), 239–97.
- 67 Flora Lewis, “The Wound in Christ’s Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response,” in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H.M. Taylor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 204–29; Martha Easton, “The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages,”