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Ritual and Gender in Medieval Cultures



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Cover design: Nasia Demetriou

Cover Image: Mirror Case with Lovers, French, second quarter 14th c.

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Ritual and Gender in Medieval Cultures: Introduction to *Eventum 2*

Abstract

This first article introduces the theme of the present special issue of *Eventum* that concerns the strong interrelationship between ritual and gender in medieval cultures. Drawing on contemporary ritual and gender theories, such as those of Catherine Bell, Judith Butler, Candace West and Don Zimmerman, and Erving Goffman, which highlight the key role of gender in ritual and treat ritual as the source of gender construction, the article explores briefly the gendered aspects of ritual and the ritual dimensions of gender in the Middle Ages while pointing out the shared characteristics of (medieval) ritual and gender. Followed by the special issue's other contributions, this introductory article argues that a good understanding of medieval cultures' workings cannot be achieved without taking into consideration the inevitable connections between ritual and gender.

Keywords

ritual; ritualization; gender; performativity; embodiment; interactiveness; power; resistance; *Eventum 2*

1. This introductory chapter was written during a research visit at Dumbarton Oaks Library and Archives (Washington DC) in June 2024 that was funded by the Byzantine Studies programme at Dumbarton Oaks (DO) and the University of Cyprus. I would like to thank both institutions for making this research visit possible. I shall also warmly thank the Director of Byzantine Studies at DO, Nikos Kontogiannis and all the other members of the staff that made my research stay so enjoyable and productive. My thanks go also to Angeliki Lymberopoulou for our fruitful discussions on Byzantine culture over lunch and coffee breaks during our stay at DO.

Introduction

The idea for a special issue of *Eventum* on medieval ritual and gender arose during an international conference entitled "Rituals of Gender Staging and Performance in the Middle Ages" that took place in Bamberg (Germany) between the 03 and 04 of May 2024 and was organised by the Centre for Medieval Studies (ZeMas) of the University of Bamberg.¹ The conference was initiated in the framework of the H2020 project "Network for Medieval Arts and Rituals" (NetMAR, 2021–23; Grant Agreement no. 951875)

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and was also supported by the SPOT funding line of the Women's Representative of the University of Bamberg. The editors of *Eventum* welcome this chance to thank the European Commission and the University of Bamberg for their support. They would also like to express their gratitude to both Ingrid Bennewitz and Michaela Pölzl for the initiative to organise this stimulating, well-attended, and successful conference.

The substantial articles included in this special issue were developed from the two conference papers that reached the stage of publication. An important purpose of this special issue and the conference from which it sprang has been to bring to the fore and highlight the intersections of ritual and gender in medieval societies that are frequently reflected in their cultural products, either textual or visual. Even though it is generally agreed that these two diachronic practices “offer valuable new ways to study power and systems of social relations [...], the[ir] connections [...] have remained largely unexplored” (Strocchia 155) – at least as far as the study of premodern cultures is concerned. Sharon Strocchia's assertion that was initially expressed more than thirty-five years ago (in 1988, at a symposium at Cornell University; Migiel and Schiesari vi) is still valid for the field of Medieval Studies.

According to pioneering work in ritual and gender studies, ritual and gender have several common characteristics: performativity, embodiment, repetitive stylization, temporality, collectivity, interactiveness, power, and resistance. These shared features are strongly interrelated,² since they are inherent elements of ritualization – the process that brings into being both ritual and gender.³ Here ritualization is used in Catherine Bell's sense, as a practice and “strategic form of socialization” (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 98) that

involves the very drawing, in and through the activity itself, of a privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being *performed* and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow. [...] Intrinsic to ritualization are strategies for differentiating itself [...] from other ways of acting within a particular culture. [...] The strategies of ritualization are particularly *rooted in the body*, specifically, the *interaction* of the social body within a symbolically constituted *spatial and temporal environment*. Essential to ritualization is the *circular production of a ritualized*

2. These common characteristics will be briefly presented below.

3. For ritualization, see also the introductory article of *Eventum* 1 (Constantinou, “*Eventum*” 9). For gender ritualization, see Hollywood, Johnson, “Gender Ritualization”, and Butler, *Bodies that Matter* ix, 60.

body which in turn produces *ritualized practices*. [...] An important corollary to this is the fact that ritualization [...] is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 90, 93; emphasis added).

Being public ritualized practices that are enacted outside “systematic thinking”, ritual and gender do, in fact, shape and are shaped by each other. As formulated by Todd Ferguson, “the social differences between men and women shape how bodies respond in rituals” (Ferguson 267) and “ritual [i]s a mechanism of gender” (Johnson 82). It is probably the many similarities and stark interconnections between ritual and gender that led influential gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, to employ ritual language and terminology while developing their gender theories. Influenced by the work of the famous anthropologist Victor Turner, Butler describes gender as another form of “ritual social drama” (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 526 and *Gender Trouble* 178). More recent work on ritual, on the other hand, has been informed by gender studies. Ritual theorists have used the feminist notion of gender to show the ways in which it influences individuals’ (emotional) involvement in rituals and how individuals, in turn, use gender within rituals to validate gender superiority and privilege or to resist subordination and exercise agency (e.g. Ferguson; Grimes, *The Craft* 249, 280; Bell, *Ritual Theory*).

As far as the interaction of medieval ritual and gender is concerned, a good case in point is the (Byzantine) liturgy, since it presupposed and was based on gender differences and distinct types of masculinity and femininity.⁴ Throughout the Byzantine period, liturgy was performed by male priests,⁵ since women were treated as spiritually inferior and were considered ritually impure due to female bodily functions, such as menstruation, birth-giving, stillbirth, and postpartum bleeding (Glibetić 171–77; Berger, *Gender Differences* 95–126; Viscuso 19–28; Synek). In Teresa Berger’s words, “the threefold order of bishop, presbyters, and deacons [...] require[d] a gender-specific body, namely that of a man”. As she goes on to say, there “was a distinct priestly masculinity, one that excluded not only all women, but also a host of nonpriestly men” (Berger, “Christian Worship and Gender Practices” 8). Furthermore, the women, who were allowed to enter the liturgical space, were separated from men and were (and still are)

4. This is still valid for contemporary orthodox liturgy, that is an heir to Byzantine mass. For gender in ancient, medieval, and contemporary Christian liturgical practices, see Berger. As for the unequal position of women in the performance of contemporary Orthodox rituals, see Purpura who shows how these rituals “reinforce and exhibit androcentric preferences” (Purpura, “Constructing the Patriarchal Woman” 172).

5. Even though in the early and middle Byzantine period there were female deacons (deaconesses), particularly in Constantinople and Jerusalem, these did not have the same functions with their male counterparts who had public processional and other liturgical responsibilities, including the distribution of Communion during the liturgy. Moreover, compared to male diaconate, the prerequisites for becoming a deaconess were much more demanding and the punishment for a deaconess’ misbehaviour was by far stricter (see Karras, “The Liturgical Functions of Consecrated Women” and “Female Deacons”).

denied access to the sanctuary (Caseau, “Experiencing the Sacred”; Marinis; Berger, “Wisdom Has Built Her House”; Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium”).

In what follows, first the central common features of ritual and gender mentioned above will be quickly discussed by drawing once again on contemporary theories, since these offer an insight into the shared workings of ritual and gender, either past or present. For each common characteristic, medieval, and chiefly Byzantine, examples will be given to bring to the fore some of the ways in which ritual and gender operated and intersected in medieval cultures. Finally, within the framework of a sketchy presentation of rituals’ uses for gender-specific purposes the remaining articles of this special issue will be briefly introduced.

Performativity

The theorist that exemplified the performative dimension of ritual in the most prominent way was Turner whose most eloquent follower has been the initiator of *performance studies*, Richard Schechner (Schechner, *Performance Studies* and “From Ritual to Theatre”; Turner, *The Ritual Process*).⁶ The two theorists treat ritual as a form of drama where participants play their parts by enacting established and recognizable scripts of social roles and identities. Different rituals are performed by specific authorities involving certain groups that have a specified behaviour and/or appearance. Rituals are enacted on designated times and at certain spaces having defined features in terms of architecture, interior design, and light and including certain ritual artworks, objects, and furniture. Rituals observe a given group’s, community’s, or society’s important dates and events (e.g. the liturgical commemoration of Byzantine earthquakes (Croke)) and places (e.g. the square in front of the *Hodegon* monastery in Constantinople where the Tuesday rite of the Virgin Hodegetria icon was performed (Lidov)). Rituals also link personal experiences to society and allow individuals to come in terms with their fears and anxieties (e.g. Byzantine rites of passage from infancy to adulthood (Baun) and rituals of brotherhood (Rapp 48–87), marriage (Radle, “The Development of Byzantine Marriage Rites”), pregnancy loss (Glibetić) and death (Velkovska)).⁷

6. For a short history of the performative turn in ritual studies, see Grimes, “Performance Theory”.

7. There is a growing bibliography on the performative dimension of medieval rituals. Some representative examples include Heinzer; Jezierski et al.; White Walker; Pentcheva; Postlewate and Hüsken; Asad.

While the influential sociologist Erving Goffman was probably the first who referred to the performative dimension of gender through his notion of “gender display”, which he introduced in his homonymous article of 1976 (Goffman, “Gender Display”), it took more than ten years to develop a first theory of gender performativity. Goffman’s performative approach was adopted and modified by the sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman in their article entitled “Doing Gender” (West and Zimmerman). However, it was through the work of a philosopher – Butler – and not a sociologist that the theory of gender performativity found its fullest development. For Butler, like West and Zimmerman whose work is not taken into consideration by the first, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). As Butler further states, “the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179).

Gender performativity is illustrated in a variety of medieval sources – e.g. theological, legal, medical, hagiographical, and historiographical – prescribing men’s and women’s behaviour, emotions, gestures and general appearance in their various manly and womanly roles as emperors/empresses, ascetics, ecclesiastics, parents etc.⁸ For example, a (Byzantine) woman’s good mothering was performed through the practice of breastfeeding and a complete devotion to her children (Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou). A bad mother, in contrast, refrained from breastfeeding and disregarded her children’s needs (Stathakopoulos). A good (Byzantine) father, on the other hand, had to undertake the family’s security and subsistence and to arrange fitting marriages for his children (Caseau “Childhood and Gender”). Of course, the bad father undertook none of these fatherly responsibilities. For instance, the male protagonist of a satirical narrative poem produced in Constantinople in the twelfth century, the so-called “first ptochoprodromic poem”, who is totally indifferent to his family’s needs, emerges as a bad father.

Despite its inherent performativity, gender is broadly perceived as a natural human quality: “femininity and masculinity are in a sense the

8. The bibliography on gender performativity in the Middle Ages is vast. See, e.g., Meyer and Messis; Templeton; Constantinou and Meyer; Constantinou 2014 and 2005; Brubaker and Smith; Riches and Salih; Kelly; James; Bullough; Lees.

9. For Judith Butler, neither sex is natural, but like gender it is a construct (Butler, *Gender Trouble*).

prototypes of essential expression – something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterisation of the individual” (Goffman, “Gender Display” 75; see also Butler, *Gender Trouble*; West and Zimmerman).⁹ The idea of gender’s naturalness, is not new, but it goes back to the Old Testament where gender is presented as God-given: “God created man in His own image, male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27–28). Following the biblical dictum, medieval people, too, considered masculinity and femininity as attributes that were bestowed upon human beings by God. Even though God is described as to have created the two genders “in His own image”, man emerges as more perfect than his female counterpart. Thus, in the Middle Ages men were treated as superior to women (Bennett and Karras 2, 5; Murray).

Embodiment and Repetitive Stylization

Butler’s emphasis on the body for the creation of the gendered self brings us to the second and third common characteristics between ritual and gender: embodiment and repetitive stylization. Butler uses drag as the primary example of the body’s recurrent gendered stylization (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxiii–xxiv, xxviii, 175–80). A medieval counterpart of Butler’s example can be detected in hagiography where some pious women (e.g. Marina/Marinos, Euphrosyne/Smaragdus, Matrona/Babylas) adopt characteristics of a male appearance and behaviour to lead, for some time or until their death, a religious life as cenobitic monks or male hermits. These women’s male bodily stylizations and performances within monastic contexts prove so powerful and successful that their fellow-monks never notice their female sex. Their femaleness becomes perceptible as soon as they switch to the performance of female gender through the corresponding bodily stylization or when their dead bodies are prepared for burial (Wright; Constantinou, “Holy Actors and Actresses” and *Female Corporeal Performances* 90–126; Hotchkiss).

Interestingly, the female monks of medieval hagiography do not only exemplify the embodied performativity and repetitive stylization of gender, but they also manifest the key role of gender in the enactment of monastic rituals. It is through male bodily performances that they can execute and participate in the rituals of their male monasteries. The protagonists whose female sex must be revealed before their

death are forced to immediately leave the monastery, since their female sex excludes them from male monastic (ritual) life. As we read in the anonymous Byzantine Greek *Life of Matrona* (7th c.), the protagonist's involvement in liturgy greatly unsettles the monastery's abbot who tells her: "But how have you approached the divine mysteries with your head uncovered? And how have you offered the kiss of peace to the brethren?" (Featherstone 26). As an individual belonging to the female sex, Matrona was expected to participate in liturgy with her head covered (Radle, "The Veiling of Women in Byzantium" 1092–93), following thus the Pauline commandment (1 Cor. 6). At the same time, she was banned from the male ritual of the kiss of peace that was exchanged among the clergy during the eucharistic liturgy (Denysenko 157–59; Taft, *A History of the Liturgy* 374–75).

While raising gender issues involved in the body's stylization, the abbot's reproaches simultaneously point to the significant role of embodiment and its repetitive stylization in (monastic) rituals that, too, are inherently reiterative (Michaels). Rituals are enacted through the participants' bodies, voices, movements, gestures, postures, dress, hair style, general appearance, and arrangement in ritual space and time. According to ritual theorist Bell, for instance, the ritual's logic is "embodied in the physical movements of the body" (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 99). For Bell, "the body is [also] key to understanding how ritual can cause changes to occur without participants being consciously aware of them" (Bell, *Ritual Theory* 304).

Whereas the body is the chief ritual actor and speaker, there are rituals, such as the kiss of peace, that must not be enacted by female bodies. Moreover, the Byzantine liturgy, as pointed out before, became possible by ruling out menstruating or postpartum women. As the abbot's reprimands to Matrona suggest, gender did not only determine who should perform the liturgy and other monastic rituals or who should be excluded from participating in them, but it also regulated bodily stylization. Women who were granted access to the liturgy, as already mentioned, were expected to cover their heads and thus perform through their bodies their inferior status.

In general, the Byzantine liturgy serves as a good example for illustrating the centrality of the body in association with its repetitive stylization in ritual. Depending on their rank, the priests

performing the liturgy used their bodies – which were dressed in the corresponding rank’s liturgical vestments (Woodfin 3–46) – to carry out the liturgy’s different parts and embedded rituals, such as the preparation and distribution of the Holy Communion, praying, delivery of sermons, and reading from the Scripture. Priestly prayer, for instance, consisted of a series of bodily motions including posture and gesture and prostration to the ground. Imitating the priest, the congregation would make similar bodily movements and repeat his prayers (White Walker; Taft, *The Byzantine Rite*; Wybrew). To deliver a sermon, a bishop would come out of the sanctuary to climb the ambo: “a set of stairs and raised platform near the center of the nave” (White Walker 34). With the Gospel in his hands, the deacon, who was a low-ranking priest, would also make a short procession from the sanctuary to the ambo and back to read aloud extracts from the Scripture (Mainstone 227).

Temporality, Collectivity, and Interactiveness

Both ritual and gender are temporal, collective, and interactive. Rituals are performed in a certain timeframe (e.g. all-night vigils in (medieval) churches and monasteries). Gender, on the other hand, is “constituted in time”; it is a “*social temporality*” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179; emphasis in original). As doings, ritual and gender take place in time and become discernible as long as they are performed based on preexisting scripts. Neither ritual nor gender are enacted in isolation. The members of a community come together to a ritual space (e.g. shrine, church, monastery) to collectively participate in one or more rituals (e.g. liturgy, baptism, funeral). Through rituals, a community’s collective identity is shaped and strengthened, a process that the French sociologist Émile Durkheim termed as “collective effervescence” (Durkheim). In terms of gender, masculinity and femininity are based upon a “collective agreement” on how to “perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178). Social and cultural rules determine how men and women should behave, either within or outside rituals.

Lastly, ritual and gender are produced and reproduced through human interaction. Returning once again to the orthodox liturgy, it involves ritual interaction among the members of different priestly ranks and between clergy and congregation. In fact, no ritual is possible without

the participants' interactions. As for gender, according to Goffman, gender identity is framed through interaction rituals within which individuals learn how to display their gender (Goffman, "Gender Display"). In his previous writings, Goffman argues that self-reaffirmation necessitates other people's acceptance and recognition which are achieved during human interactions (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*). Like rituals, therefore, gender constitution and identity crafting are interactive processes. Our Matrona, for instance, crafts her monkish identity through daily interactions with her fellow-monks. Her unknown hagiographer repeatedly mentions that her virtue supersedes that of the other monks and that she models her way of life on that of the monastery's abbot.

Power and Resistance

Ritual's power, according to Bell, does not only lie "in the shaping of a social ethos, but also in the articulation, redefinition, and legitimation of cultural realities" (Bell, "The Ritual Body" 299). Exploiting ritual's power, social authorities – political, religious, and familial – naturalize and reinforce their supremacy over others who come to an understanding of themselves as inferior. At the same time, as the work of Michel Foucault has shown, the technologies of power that are incorporated in rituals – especially rituals of discipline and punishment – have a great impact on the participants' body which unconsciously takes on, rebuilds, and further reinforces existing power relations (Foucault). In short, rituals have the power to shape individuals' identities and social roles, to connect people, families, groups, and communities, and to reiterate general principles and ideologies, promoting social stability and conserving power relations (Bailey and Barclay 10).

While the social dynamics of ritual power are imposed upon participants shaping and regulating their identity, behaviour, and way of life, individuals or groups can also use rituals in strategic ways to empower themselves, achieve their goals, and exercise agency. Thus, ritual can serve both social control and social change (Bell, *Ritual Theory*). A famous case in point from medieval cultures is illustrated in martyr legends in which public spectacles of ritual violence aim at both disciplining individuals who disrespect official religion and discouraging others from following their example. However,

through rituals of punishment ancient and medieval martyrs exercise agency and are worshipped as saints acquiring innumerable followers (e.g. Healy Wasyliv; Pirovansky; Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances* 19–58; Einbinder).

Like ritual, gender is a cultural arrangement that operates through processes of power and resistance. While it is enacted under social control and restraint, gender includes the conditions and possibilities of resistance against the norms within which it functions (Butler, *Undoing Gender* and *Gender Trouble*). In terms of power processes, the established gender binary – consisting of a superior masculinity and an inferior femininity – is in Butler’s words “the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 42). Similarly with ritual, gender normalizes certain forms of masculinity and femininity which are unconsciously incorporated by individuals. As a form of social power, gender allows individuals to become socially recognizable and acceptable. Individuals who fail to act according to the regulations surrounding their gender are punished through marginalisation and stigmatisation. Male Byzantine historians, such as Prokopios (6th c.), slandered elite women (e.g. Theodora and Antonina) who appeared to transgress the norms of their gender (Constantinou, “Gendered Emotions and Affective Genders” 288–89; Georgiou).

As already suggested, power is involved not only in the production of hegemonic masculinity and femininity but also in the two genders’ interactions and among individuals belonging to the same gender but having different social, financial, religious, and other backgrounds. In Byzantine society, for example, free men were more powerful than women, but free women had more rights than either male or female slaves. Women of the lower social strands, in contrast, enjoyed more freedom of movement than elite women (Herrin; Laiou). Ecclesiastical hierarchy created more and less powerful churchmen while monastic hierarchy involved power relations among monks or nuns (Purpura, *God, Hierarchy, and Power*).

In her *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler makes gender trouble by thinking “through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power”

(Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44). According to Butler, the gender binary can be subverted through the multiplication of gender identities: “whether one refers to ‘gender trouble’ or ‘gender blending,’ ‘transgender’ or ‘cross-gender,’ one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond that naturalized binary” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 41–42). Some Byzantine instances of “gender trouble” or “gender blending” include the said female monks, consecrated virgins, and eunuchs.

By participating in male rituals and monastic life, female monks – if they ever existed – cancelled gender segregation in monasticism and subverted the general belief that women were incapable of undertaking a man’s ascetic life that was considered harsher (Talbot, *Varieties of Monastic Experience* and “A Comparison of Monastic Experience”). Consecrated virgins were not considered women, since they did not undertake the roles of wives and mothers that the Byzantine patriarchal society assigned to the female gender. Removing themselves from the marriage market and traditional male control, consecrated virgins exercised agency and were respectful in ways that traditional women were not (Brown 259–84). Finally, eunuchs – castrated men or individuals with indefinite genitals – lay also outside the gender binary and the heterosexual matrix (Gonzalez-Salzberg and Perisanidi). They served societal needs related to business, administration, and religion that could not be fulfilled by the two dominant genders (Ringrose). It has to be pointed out, however, that even though male monks, consecrated virgins, and eunuchs might be treated as different Byzantine genders, textual sources often describe them by employing a binary gender discourse: female monks and consecrated virgins are called “manly women” (Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances* 90–91, 112; Brown 259–84) whereas eunuchs are seen as imperfect men and womanlike or womanish individuals (Ringrose 35–42).

Gender *in* Medieval Rituals and this Issue

If, as the previous discussion has hopefully demonstrated, the ritualized body makes rituals and genders that involve relations of power and resistance, what happens when gender determines the initiation, form, structure, enactment, and purpose of a ritual or set of rituals? Medieval rituals – political, religious, and familial –

which were chiefly based on the gender binary, served a number of gender-specific needs and purposes: they were used to teach men and women how to perform their gender as defined by law and canon law; to establish and confirm an individual's manhood or womanhood; to discipline and punish individuals who did not conform to their assigned gender roles; to sustain the gender binary and validate gender inequalities; to empower women in a male-dominated world; to release men's and women's anxieties associated with bodily functions, gender-specific social roles, and professions; and to initiate individuals to male and female forms of piety and asceticism and to gender-specific dynastic and family traditions. To achieve these and other relevant gender-specific goals, rituals were authored either by men or by women to address either mixed audiences or groups belonging to the same gender. They could also be exclusively male or female.

Even though this is more than a schematic presentation of gender's role in and relation to medieval rituals, it reveals the complexity of gender dynamics in ritual enactment which, as pointed out at the outset, has not received yet the scholarly attention it deserves. We must ask many, and often almost unanswerable, questions in order to be able to approach the interactions of medieval gender and ritual, and in so doing to fathom essential aspects of medieval cultures' workings. What kind of rituals were favoured by men and which by women belonging to different social, religious, and other groups? When, where, and which purposes were served each time? How did men or women of different backgrounds "use" their gender practices to exercise power or to cope with being dominated? How did social notions about men and women determine their bodily actions and reactions in rituals? In which rituals and for what reasons did men assume female roles and women male roles? Which rituals created novel forms of gender expression enabling thus the creation of new power relationships? What kind of rituals empowered women?

The following two articles deal with some of these issues. Lilian Diniz's article entitled "'When a Woman Recites an Incantation, a Serpent Recites it': Female Magic and Medicine in Caesarius of Arles" examines women's rituals related to the social role of motherhood. As she shows, these exclusively female rituals provided Western medieval women with agency, allowing them to overcome their gender subordination. The influential sermons of Caesarius of

Arles (6th c.) castigating women, who performed and participated in magic rituals for fertility, abortion, and healing purposes, reveal the church's anxiety over practices that went beyond its control. Caesarius and his later followers throughout the Middle Ages attempted through the first's sermons to reduce, if not to terminate, female rituals by presenting them as demonic.

The second article by Marion Darilek ("Rituals of Female (Dis) Empowerment: Baptism in the Context of Conversion in Medieval German Literature") is concerned with the interplay between female empowerment and disempowerment in Christian rituals depicted in Middle High German literary texts. Taking as a case study the ritual of baptism, the author shows how some heroines use a Christian ritual administered by male clergy to reverse gender hierarchy. However, through close readings of scenes depicting baptismal and conversion rituals in Thecla's legend, Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel*, Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam und Josaphat*, and *Salman und Morolf*, it becomes clear that female agency is inseparable from female powerlessness in the examined texts.

Apart from examining how rituals in different medieval cultures "helped define and represent gender roles" (Strochhia 155); how in particular they confirmed women's inferior status and subordination; how they provided the female gender with resistance and agency; and in which ways these accomplishments were related to aesthetic and generic concerns, the present issue also points to the key similarities between (medieval) ritual and gender that reveal the gendered aspects of ritual and the ritual dimensions of gender, both in the present and the past. Of course, this is a very preliminary examination of the intersections between medieval ritual and gender. Hopefully, this special issue will initiate new and more systematic studies of this significant aspect of medieval cultures.

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