

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF HAIR IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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CHAPTER SIX

Gender and Sexuality

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A fourteenth-century German panel painting depicting an incident from the life of Saint Clare is instructive in understanding the different ways that hair could signify in medieval society and culture (Figure 6.1). The panel, probably created for a convent of Poor Clares



FIGURE 6.1 *The Bishop of Assisi Giving a Palm to Saint Clare*, Germany (ca. 1360). The Cloisters Collection, 1984.343, www.metmuseum.org.

in Nuremburg, illustrates an event that took place on Palm Sunday in the year 1212, when Saint Francis arranged for the bishop of Assisi to hand a palm to Clare. All three figures have different hairstyles that serve as markers of identity. The bishop is depicted with a beard and chin-length hair topped with a miter. Behind him stands Saint Francis, recognizable because of his brown tunic and rope belt, the visible stigmata on his hands, and his clean-shaven face and tonsured head. Clare wears a luxurious dress and crown, denoting her noble status, and her long, flowing hair identifies her as an unmarried woman. However, this scene represents the transformational moment when Clare gives up her life of privilege in order to follow Francis. This transition was marked by cutting her long hair with the large pair of scissors held in his hands and ultimately led to the establishment of the community of religious women bearing her name. In the Middle Ages, hair could be a marker of class, occupation, gender, and sexuality. Depending on whether hair was short or long, light or dark, present or absent, confined to the head or sprouting in other places on the body, it created identity for its owner and for others, and as is the case with Saint Clare, it was sometimes the change from one sort of hair to another that created the most significant meaning in medieval culture.

Ancient and medieval beliefs about the generation of hair reveal broader attitudes, drawn from philosophy, science, and theology, about gender and sexuality.¹ The views of Aristotle and Galen in particular provided the basis for medieval views about gender based on physiological differences. Hair was the result of excess bodily fluids, "gross humors," which were extruded through the pores of the skin. Men were by nature hot and dry (and therefore superior), and they could be characterized by shorter hair and the ability to grow beards, while women were colder and moister, the hair on their heads grew longer, and their faces were smooth and hairless. In Aristotelian thought, beards became associated with masculine virility, and this thought prevailed throughout the Middle Ages; for example, in the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen in her *Causae et curae* concurred that a man's ability to grow a beard was due to his greater warmth, and that "woman is without a beard because she is formed from the flesh of man and is subordinate to man and lives in greater quiet."² In addition to this scientific evidence, the words of Paul in Corinthians are often invoked as the basis for Christian attitudes about gender and hair. Paul admonishes, "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."³ For Paul, men had short hair and women had long hair, and any deviation from that prescription was a violation of God and nature.

Despite Paul's words, during the Middle Ages the marker of masculinity for men was not always short hair. The Merovingians, the ruling dynasty of the Latin area known as Francia from the fifth to the eighth century, were popularly known as the "long-haired kings," and their unshorn, flowing locks were a symbol of virility and fierceness (although it should be noted that this long hair was usually shoulder-length, rather than the waist-length hair favored by women). It also distinguished ruler from the ruled; their subjects could not grow their hair beyond a certain length. Despite the Greco-Roman association of long hair with Germanic "barbarians," for the Merovingians, long hair distinguished the free man from the slave.⁴

However, the next ruling dynasty of the Franks, the Carolingians, wore their hair short. In fact, Einhard, the biographer of Charlemagne, takes pains to mention explicitly the long hair of the deposed Merovingian leader Childeric III as if it is yet another characteristic of his ineffectual rule: "The King, contented with the mere royal title, with long hair and flowing beard, used to sit upon the throne and act the part of a

ruler.⁵ After the Carolingians came to power Childeric's hair was cut off and he was forced into a monastery. This was deeply humiliating, since for the Merovingians the cutting of hair was fraught with symbolic significance; only deposed leaders and other disgraced men had their hair shorn as a form of punishment and exile. There is a biblical parallel with the Old Testament figure of Samson, who was rendered powerless when the temptress Delilah seduced him into revealing that the source of his strength was his hair, and he became impotently unable to defend himself when she cut it off. In contrast, the Franks ritually cut the hair of their boys; Charles Martel sent his son to the Lombard King Liutbrand for his first haircut, thereby solidifying them into a near-familial bond.⁶

And yet, there were times and places during the Middle Ages when long hair for men was decidedly back in fashion for secular men, especially its upper-class members. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there are several instances when the clergy condemned the men who, in the words of Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, "grew their hair like girls."⁷ On an Easter Sunday, the men of Henry I's court in England were criticized by the bishop of Séz, who stated, "Those who ... copy women in their flowing hair will be no better than women in defending their country ... You all have long hair like women, which is not right for you who are made in the image of God and ought to act with manly strength."⁸ He went so far as to produce a pair of scissors and cut their hair right then and there. At least in the eyes of the bishop, long hair was associated with femininity and, thus, was problematic for the men of the English court. William of Malmesbury, a Benedictine monk who wrote both history and hagiography, also criticized the fashion for long hair at the Anglo-Norman court and suggested that such men were not fully masculinized.⁹ The dismay about groups of men with long hair seems to suggest an anxiety not just about hair length but also about the potential for transgressive sexual behavior.

In the Pauline tradition, long hair was a glory for women alone, in part because it served as a veil of modesty. These prescriptions about women and their hair were extended by the early Christian Church Father Tertullian, who dictated that hair by itself was not an adequate covering. In his "On the Veiling of Virgins," Tertullian admonished women, both unmarried and married, to veil their hair, primarily so that the sight of their unbound locks would not excite temptation in men.¹⁰ Yet despite Tertullian's strictures about women and exposed hair, by the later Middle Ages a clear distinction developed between married women, who kept their hair under cover, and unmarried women, who did not. Long, flowing hair became a symbol of maidenhood and, by extension, of availability for marriage. Once a woman married, she concealed her hair in a variety of ways, depending on her status and the fashions of the period. Medieval tomb sculptures, for example, often depict married women with some type of head covering concealing their hair.¹¹ The well-known *Le Ménagier de Paris*, written in the fourteenth century as if it is a handbook prepared by a bourgeois Parisian husband for his fifteen-year-old wife, contains all sorts of advice about the proper running of a household but also includes information about proper attire. The author admonishes his young wife to avoid looking like

drunken, foolish, or ignorant women who do not care about their own honor or the good repute of their estate or their husband, and go with ... their hair in disarray, spilling from their coifs ... Be careful then, my dear, that your hair, your headdress, your kerchief, your hood and the rest of your garments be neatly and simply arranged, so that anyone who sees you will not be able to laugh or mock you.¹²

Whether Tertullian writing in the second century or *Le Ménagier de Paris* in the fourteenth, clearly women were meant to keep their hair under control, not only to preserve their own reputations but also to ensure that the men who saw them or lived with them could avoid temptation or disgrace.

The ultimate model of proper behavior and modest appearance for medieval women to emulate was the Virgin Mary, even if they could not possibly achieve her degree of sanctified virtue. She was by far the most represented woman in medieval art and the source of fervent devotion by both genders. The very nature of her role in the Christological narrative demanded a consideration of gender and sexuality. She was the quintessential marriage of body and spirit, the stainless vessel through which the word became flesh, both virgin and mother. Medieval images of the Virgin Mary can vary depending on date, function, and historical context, but in most images, the appearance of Mary's hair helps to identify her either as a virtuous maiden with smooth, flowing, uncovered hair, or as a wife and mother with her hair modestly concealed.

A large number of sculptures depicting the Virgin Mary survive from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, called Thrones of Wisdom (Figure 6.2). These wooden sculptures of



FIGURE 6.2 *Enthroned Virgin and Child*, France (1150–1200). The Cloisters Collection, 67.153, www.metmuseum.org.

the seated Virgin with the Christ Child on her lap were usually held in monasteries and often used in church processions; some of them held relics.¹³ Similar to the majority of the Byzantine images of the Virgin, in these sculptures, Mary's hair is usually completely covered, or with perhaps just a small portion visible beneath her head covering.¹⁴ Typically there are few indications of her gender; there is little sense of the curves of a feminine body beneath the drapery that covers it in abstract folds. There are varying interpretations of this sort of presentation of the Virgin; it can be seen as typical of Romanesque art in general, with an overall privileging of abstraction and symbolism over realism. This sort of gender-neutral depiction of the Virgin Mary can also be interpreted as appropriate for the monastic context within which most of these sculptures operated, and the complicated theological work that they did, with Mary functioning not only as a seat for Christ as Solomonic judge but also as a human altar, presenting the body of Christ for visual and spiritual consumption.

Yet later in the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary began to be represented not only with her hair uncovered but with luxurious tresses flowing down her back. Here, her hair connotes both purity and innocence. Representations of the Virgin Mary sometimes followed the trajectory of her narrative, depicting her with unbound hair in her youth and with a covered head during scenes of the Passion, when she might be present at the foot of the cross. But in the later Middle Ages, it could be argued that one of the most commonly depicted scenes of the Virgin, in both the private devotional space of the opening prayer in the Book of Hours and the public space of the church altarpiece, was the Annunciation, where typically she was represented with uncovered hair.

Almost without exception, that long, flowing hair is blonde. Long, blonde hair has a rich and multilayered significance in medieval culture, and above all it was a signifier of feminine attractiveness. For the Virgin Mary, her blonde hair and her physical beauty connoted her purity and state of spiritual grace, but in more secular contexts, long blonde hair could have decidedly more erotic connotations. Beautiful women in medieval love poetry and romances were often described as possessing flowing, flaxen hair, along with other descriptions of a codified beauty that included small breasts set high up on the chest, softly swelling bellies, and pale skin. Yet in these more secular contexts, long tresses inspire erotic desire. As just one example, the love interest of the thirteenth-century courtly love poem *Roman de la Rose* is described in these terms, and her physical beauty inspires her pursuit and ultimate seduction/rape. The incredible popularity of this thirteenth-century work is evident in that more than three hundred manuscripts of the text still survive. Despite the fact that the late medieval writer Christine de Pisan vehemently objected to the misogyny of the *Roman de la Rose*, particularly the section added by Jean de Meun, in her own instructional book for women she cautions against quickly changing, extravagant fashions and writes that, "Nothing, after all, is a more beautiful headdress for a woman than fine blond hair, as St. Paul bears witness when he says, 'Hair is a woman's capital ornament.'" ¹⁵ It seems that medieval women may have taken these ideas about the superiority of blonde hair to heart. In the *Trotula*, a collection of texts on women's medicine, there are a series of recipes that focus on the adornment and enhancement of hair, including several for dye to make it blonde.¹⁶

The connection between physical attraction and women's hair is also apparent in biblical narratives such as David and Bathsheba. David is seduced by the sight of Bathsheba in the bath, to the point that he arranges for her husband to be sent into battle and killed so that he can have her instead. This scene commonly illustrated the Penitential Psalms in Psalters

and Books of Hours, since David repented of his sin. While it may be Bathsheba's nudity that is the main source of her seductive appeal, her long, flowing, usually blonde hair is part of the visual construction of her dangerously tempting appearance, even though her hair is not mentioned in the biblical account. Ironically, David's transgressive gaze is continually repeated by the viewer of these scenes, and some of them can be so erotic in the private context of the illuminated manuscript that they could lead to temptations seemingly at odds with the devotional function for which the manuscript was intended. A particularly eroticized image from the Hours of Louis XII depicts Bathsheba with shimmering golden hair cascading down her back (Figure 6.3).¹⁷ This connects her to other eroticized images of female bathers, especially popular in fourteenth-century Netherlandish painting, and also to objects associated with the toilette.¹⁸ Diane Wolfthal has explored the varying associations of the ivory combs that survive, particularly from the fourteenth century. Images that depict men watching women comb their long hair, as well as the imagery of courtly love that appear on the combs themselves, underscore that feminine hair and its arrangement had associations with erotic suggestion.¹⁹ The image of the harlot of Babylon seated upon the waters in the fourteenth-century Angers Apocalypse tapestry depicts her



FIGURE 6.3 Jean Bourdichon, *Bathsheba Bathing*, Tours, France (1498–1499). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 79, recto.

in a gown girdled with a belt so tight over her breasts that she appears to be naked from the waist up, and combing her hair while looking at her reflection in a mirror (Figure 6.4).²⁰ She is the embodiment of vain self-involvement—and yet she bears a striking visual similarity to a depiction of Saint Catherine in the *Belles Heures* belonging to John, the Duke of Berry (Figure 6.5). This remarkable image, one from a cycle of twelve miniatures of the saint, is a frankly sensuous depiction of Catherine in prison, with her drapery slipping off her body, her breasts exposed, and her long, blonde hair flowing down her back.²¹

The connections between long, blonde hair and eroticism can complicate viewer response to images of female saints, especially virgin martyrs. On the one hand they are connected to the Virgin Mary through their own virginity and their function as witnesses to Christ through their martyrdom. And yet the descriptions of their appearance in hagiographic texts, and their representation in medieval art, often make them indistinguishable from the heroines of medieval romances. In Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century compendium of saints' lives, the extremely popular *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend), he often describes the youth and beauty of the virgin martyrs, particularly since their physical attractiveness (and their rejection of the pagan men attracted to them) propels them on the path to martyrdom. To underscore this focus on feminine beauty, medieval images of virgin martyrs usually depict them with long, blonde hair. These textual and visual connections between the holy saint and the literary heroine are also interesting in thinking about how both types of women might have functioned as models for the physical appearance and prescribed behavior of medieval women in general. For example, there seems to be a clear connection between the appearance of the reliquaries of the Holy Virgins of Cologne and the fashions of contemporary women of the city. Joan Holladay has posited that the discovery of a Roman cemetery in Cologne, and the subsequent identification of the bones as those belonging to the martyred Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgin companions, led to an increase in devotional fervor for the saint and her cult in the thirteenth century.²² This coincided with rising anxiety in the



FIGURE 6.4 Jean Bondel and Nicolas Bataille, *the Great Whore of Babylon* (Rev. 17:3–6) in the *Apocalypse d'Angers* (1373–1387), a series of tapestries woven for Louis I, Duke of Anjou. Angers, Musée des Tapisseries. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 6.5 Paul Herman and Jean de Limbourg, *Saint Catherine Tended by Angels*, from *The Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, France (1405–1408/9). New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 17v. www.metmuseum.org.

city about the extreme asceticism of the city's Beguine population, and the Ursula-busts, with their contemporary hairstyles and headdresses (Figure 6.6), might have provided the young women of Cologne with an alternative model of spirituality, fulfilled through marriage and family.

The women discussed thus far, whether the sacred (the Virgin Mary and other biblical figures, female martyrs) or the secular (literary heroines, wives, and unmarried maidens) might be portrayed with hair that is covered or uncovered, but it is always neatly arranged. When long, flowing hair is disheveled, it connotes something quite different in medieval culture and society. This has already been alluded to by *Le Ménagier de Paris* in its criticism of the ignorant wives who parade about with “their hair in disarray.” Hair that is both uncovered and uncontrolled was an outward sign of immoderate behavior and immoral thoughts; loose hair equated to a loose woman. Thus, a wide variety of female figures were often depicted in medieval art or described in medieval texts as having wild, unkempt hair, including biblical women such as Eve and Mary Magdalene. Particularly for the latter, the emphasis on her hair can have multivalent meanings, alluding to her sensual past, as well as her devotional act of washing Christ's feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, although at times she is depicted with her hair covered, especially in scenes where she is serving as the ‘Apostle to the Apostles’ announcing the resurrection of Christ to his disciples. Other female figures typically represented with



FIGURE 6.6 Reliquary bust of a companion of Saint Ursula, Germany (sixteenth century, ca. 1520–1530). Oak, polychromed and gilt on plaster ground; glass opening for relic. Gift of J. P. Morgan, 1917 (17.190.728) Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

uncovered and often unkempt hair included mythological women such as Venus and female personifications such as Luxuria. A particularly well-known images of the latter appears on a side panel of the entrance portal at the church of Saint-Pierre at Moissac.²³ Luxuria's hair flows over her shoulders in wavy, uncombed clumps, taking the same shape as the serpents that chew on her naked breasts. Other women depicted with wild, untamed hair include monstrous and/or marginalized women such as sirens, mermaids, prostitutes, and witches. A panel from the pulpit at the Church of San Pietro in Gropina, probably dating from the twelfth century, depicts a woman with wild, uncontrolled hair holding up the split ends of a tail; above her, a male figure holds his ankles in a similar position, while serpents chew on the sides of his face (Figure 6.7). The man appears to be wearing either some sort of loincloth or, since it is carved in a similar fashion to the female figure's hair, it may be an exuberant growth of pubic hair providing a frame for his dangling penis. This seems a surprising selection of imagery for a pulpit, and it has usually been interpreted as signifying the evils of temptation. Depicting a woman with disheveled hair was also a way of signifying the ostracized Other and, thus, Jewish women and Muslim women were sometimes represented with uncovered, wild hair, even though in both religions women customarily covered their heads as signs of female modesty and reverence for God. (In actuality, prostitutes, Jews, and Muslims were sometimes required to wear identifying clothing in order to distinguish them.²⁴) One example of a woman with exposed, unkempt hair, the female figure on the Puerta de las Platerías at Santiago de Compostela (Figure 6.8), was so striking in its own time that it warranted a mention in the Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela, making it one of the rare cases where a contemporary medieval viewer describes a monument and recommends that other people pay particular attention to it. He writes, "Nor should be forgotten the woman who stands next to the Lord's Temptation, holding between her own hands the stinking head of her lover, cut off by her rightful husband, which she is forced by her husband to kiss



FIGURE 6.7 Figural tribune (left side) on pulpit in the Church of San Pietro, Gropina, Loro Ciuffenna, Arezzo, Italy (twelfth century). Photo: Syrio. Public domain.



FIGURE 6.8 *Woman with a Skull*, Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Puerta de las Platerías, left tympanum, Spain (early twelfth century). Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

twice a day. Oh, what ingenious and admirable justice for an adulterous wife; it should be recounted to everyone!"²⁵ Since the present location of the sculpted figure is not its original one, this figure has been interpreted in a variety of ways by modern scholars; most recently it has been suggested that she was meant to be seen in conjunction with a figure of David and Bathsheba.²⁶ Regardless of her specific identity, it is clear that her uncovered, tousled hair in conjunction with her partial nudity coded her as a figure of sexual temptation.

This emphasis on hair and unbridled sexuality is also evident in images and descriptions of the wild men and women, members of a mythological monstrous race who lived on the outskirts of society.²⁷ This type of uncivilized, marginalized group has a variety of sources, stories, and interpretations, but they were often characterized as being naked, and yet completely covered with body hair (in addition to long hair for the women, and long beards and shoulder-length hair for the men), as if they occupied some liminal space between human and animal. The wild people were often described as sexually promiscuous and indiscriminate, and yet because they lived outside the confines of society, later in the Middle Ages they were also understood as naïve innocents.

Just as the virgin martyrs become visually and textually entangled with the heroines of secular romances, the appearance of wild women is very reminiscent of the way that a few hermit female saints were depicted, particularly in the later Middle Ages. These women grew hair in unconventional places, most notably Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene.²⁸ The hagiographies of both saints described them as spending time in the desert, where they subsisted on diets provided through miraculous means and where their clothes rotted away. To retain their modesty, both of them grew luxurious tresses of hair. In medieval images of the saints, their hair is represented in conventional ways, flowing from their heads down to cover their bodies, but sometimes it sprouts out all over their bodies. In the miniature of Mary of Egypt carried to heaven by angels from the *Prayer Book of Charles the Bold*, the saint's body is completely covered with short hair, with just her face, breasts, knees, hands, and feet left bare (Figure 6.9). She can be contrasted with the hybrid half-woman, half-animal that appears in the left margin, combing her long hair and looking into a mirror, in a bestial depiction of sinful Vanity. And yet, Mary of Egypt's furry appearance makes her virtually indistinguishable from wild women, such as the one with a unicorn in her lap depicted in a fifteenth-century German playing card (Figure 6.10).²⁹ Emphasizing her hair seems to foreground her earlier life as a prostitute instead of the repentance and asceticism of her later sojourn in the desert.³⁰ Some of the late medieval images of furry wild people and hirsute female saints are similar to certain depictions of Satan in hell or, even more surprisingly, giant female pudenda, underscored by their visual connection to objects like the medieval metal badges in the shape of genitalia, such as the walking vulva on a pilgrimage (Figure 6.11).³¹

The ample pubic hair evident on the vulvic badge, and perhaps on the pulpit at San Pietro in Gropina, introduces another type of body hair and its relationship to gender and sexuality. Penny Howell Jolly has examined the presence, and absence, of pubic hair depicted on European nudes from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.³² While earlier in the Middle Ages, pubic hair tends to be absent, it becomes more visible on both genders in later centuries. Surprising to a modern audience, Christ is often represented with visible pubic hair, perhaps because Christ's human nature became more and more important in late medieval devotion.³³ Pubic hair could have a variety of meanings, depending on the context, but pubic hair on men had the possibility of suggesting mature masculine power and virility. For the most part, images of female nudes in medieval art



FIGURE 6.9 *Saint Mary of Egypt, Prayer Book of Charles the Bold, Rouen, France (1480–1490). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 37, fol. 153v.*



FIGURE 6.10 Master E. S., playing card with wild woman with unicorn, Germany (fifteenth century). Engraving: second state. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1922 (22.83.16) © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 6.11 Vulva figure depicted as a pilgrim, Arnemuiden, the Netherlands (1425–1475). Van Beuningen Family Collection, Langbroek, the Netherlands.

continued the classical tradition of representing them devoid of any pubic hair, so when it was present it was almost always a signifier of lust, temptation, and even prostitution.

Some women did remove their pubic hair; the practice spread to western Europe by men returning from the Crusades, where they were introduced to the fashion in eastern brothels since Muslim women typically removed their body hair.³⁴ In the later Middle Ages, a more immediately visible form of feminine hair removal became fashionable; a high forehead was a symbol of beauty and, thus, women would pluck their hairlines back and gather their hair into elaborate head coverings. A notable depiction of two different sorts of female hair appears in a miniature from the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy* (Figure 6.12).³⁵ A noblewoman, very likely Mary of Burgundy herself, sits holding her Book of Hours, dressed in the height of fashion with a high plucked hairline and her hair concealed in an elaborate hennin, a cone-shaped headdress especially worn by members of the nobility. While this scene has been variously interpreted, it seems that her devotional focus has resulted in the visionary scene visible behind her through a window-like opening, where she appears again with other court ladies, all dressed in fashionable gowns with their hair invisible underneath their hennins. In contrast, the Virgin Mary, Mary of Burgundy's named saint, is depicted with her long, blonde, uncovered hair flowing unencumbered down her back.

Whether hair grew from their heads or on their bodies, was covered or removed, or grew long or short, a marker of femininity was a smooth, beardless face. Men might be bearded or beardless, depending on age, religious vocation, and fashion. The Anglo-Saxon King Harold's scouts famously identified the invading Normans as an army of priests since they wore their hair short and were clean-shaven, as was the practice in the Latin Church; in the Greek Church, it was more common for priests to have beards.³⁶ While at different times the fashion for beards might vary, it was often the case that cultural practices surrounding the presence of facial hair for men were dictated by class, so that if upper-class men wore beards, lower-class men did not, and vice versa. In western European art, beards could signify the wisdom generally associated with the elderly, or in conjunction with exotic-looking headgear and clothing, could identify someone as from the "East" (specifically as a Jewish or Muslim man). Yet whether bearded or shaved, it was understood that the ability to grow a beard was a physiological

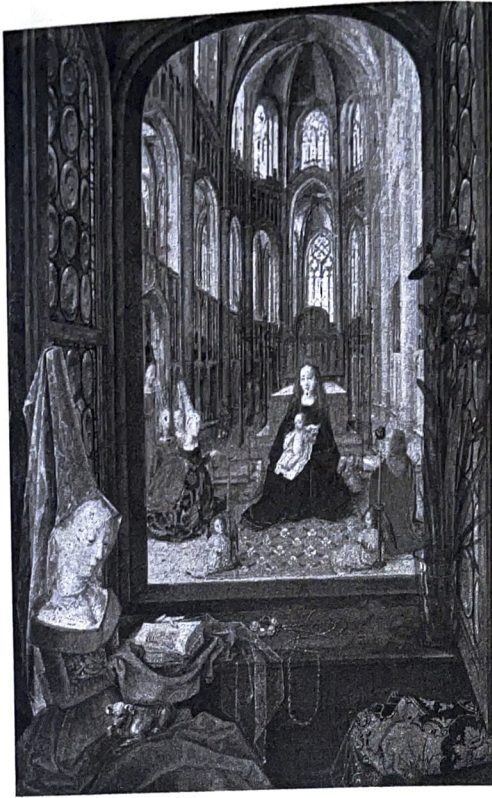


FIGURE 6.12 *Maximilian and Mary of Burgundy in front of the Virgin*, miniature from the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, manuscript, France (fifteenth century). Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY.

indication of mature masculinity. A man seemingly incapable of producing facial hair might be mocked, and his sexuality perhaps called into question, as Chaucer seems to do in his description of the Pardoner in the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*: “He had no beard, nor was he like to have; / Smooth was his face, as if he had just shaved. I took him for a gelding or a mare.”³⁷ A man who could not grow a beard veered dangerously close to feminine physiology. And yet even this gender boundary could be transgressed, particularly by female saints such as Saint Wilgefortis, who miraculously sprouted a beard in order to thwart the advances of an unwanted suitor and retain her virginity.³⁸ After a series of tortures by both her father, who had promoted the marriage, and her intended bridegroom, Wilgefortis was crucified. In fact, one theory about the origin of her legend is that it developed in order to provide an explanation for images of the crucified Christ wearing a tunic, in contrast to the loincloth that he usually wore in most medieval representations of the scene. Interestingly, the combination of bearded face and long tunic apparently was more logically explained as a miraculous and protective growth of facial hair by a woman, rather than by a man wearing seemingly feminine attire. This corresponds with medieval attitudes about potential slippages in gender binaries; both medieval hagiography and literature have a number of examples of women performing and “passing” as men for a variety of religious, political, and social reasons.³⁹ The *Legenda aurea* included several examples of women who dressed as men to enter monasteries, usually to escape marriage to a pagan man. The opposite, men performing as women, almost never happened, except in carnivalesque situations when the absurdity of such a situation was underscored.

Part of “passing” as a man meant cutting one’s hair. Because long hair was so synonymous with femininity, cutting it off was a dramatic move and was fraught with significance.⁴⁰ Although the hirsutism of particular female saints signified their extreme spiritual asceticism, the cutting of hair functioned as a way of transitioning from one state to another, usually a move from a secular identity to a spiritual one. A woman who cut her hair and gave up her socially prescribed roles as wife and mother was moving from the body to the spirit, the change of her outward appearance signifying her interior transformation. In short, cutting a woman’s hair was a method of masculinization. Even so, a leitmotif in the stories of the cross-dressing saints is that their “true” genders are revealed, often upon their deaths. In the case of cross-dressing heroines in medieval romances, such as the *Roman de Silence*, the hint of same-sex desire present when another woman falls in love with female Silence (dressed as a man to protect her father’s estate) is eradicated when Venus intervenes and miraculously turns Silence into an actual man.⁴¹

The potentially transgressive nature of a woman with short hair is evident in the case of Joan of Arc. After she was captured by the Burgundians and handed over to the English to be tried for heresy, her transvestism became a significant part of her trial, not just her decision to wear men’s clothing but also her short hair. According to the transcript of her trial, her accusers state, “Likewise, you have said that you wore and still wear men’s clothing at God’s command and at his good pleasure, and because you had orders from God to wear this habit, you have put on a short tunic doublet, and boots tied up with many pointed laces. You even wear your hair cut round above the ears.”⁴² In order to eliminate her problematic appropriation of masculine appearance, at one point Joan’s head is shaved. While a woman with short hair may be masculinized to either positive or negative effect, a woman with no hair at all becomes nearly monstrous, like the Sheelana-gigs with their bald heads and splayed vaginas.⁴³ Even in the modern era, the forcible shaving of a woman’s head is a form of punishment and humiliation; French women who slept with German soldiers during World War II had their heads shaved and were paraded through the streets.

Shaving the head completely seems to have been a humiliating experience for medieval men as well as women. Some scholars have suggested, following Freud and Lacan, that cutting the hair, and especially shaving the head, is a symbolic form of castration and, thus, a forcible shearing of the hair might signify not just a stripping of masculine power but a complete loss of gender.⁴⁴ Baldness due to the natural process of aging could also be interpreted in a negative fashion, as a loss of masculinity and virility.

One exception to the negative associations of shaving the head is the tonsure, the hairstyle adopted by men when they left the outside world for the religious life. In the German panel painting discussed at the outset of this chapter (Figure 6.1), Saint Francis is recognizable as a monk because of his so-called Roman tonsure, shaved on top with a fringe of hair on the sides; the exact form of the tonsure varied in different times and places, but always involved the removal of hair.⁴⁵ Women joining religious communities, such as Saint Clare, also either cut off or veiled their hair, thereby eliminating its associations with beauty, vanity, and sexual availability, and signaling that they were now Brides of Christ rather than brides of men. But the tonsure served as an even more obvious marker of religious and social identity. Its meanings were somewhat ambiguous; while it served as an indication of the piety and learnedness associated with monasticism, it also retained some of the more negative implications of masculine hairlessness.⁴⁶ For both men and women passing from a secular to a spiritual world, cutting the hair signified a rejection of sexuality, and by extension, a disavowal of socially prescribed gender roles.

During the Middle Ages, hair served as an important indicator of social class, religious status, age and maturity, and secular fashion. In medieval scientific, philosophical, theological, and social practice, women wore their hair long, and men wore their hair short. Long hair connoted femininity, and by extension, sexuality. For women, their hair was a source of beauty and romance, but depending on its appearance, it could also indicate vanity, pride, and temptation. Yet there were certainly times during the Middle Ages when long hair was fashionable for both sexes, although men who adopted this fashion were often criticized. In fact, the importance of hair in medieval culture is underscored by the way it reflects social attitudes, particularly expectations about gender, and thus women and men with hair more closely associated with the opposite sex occupied a transgressive space in medieval culture. The rich and subtle ways that hair could create meaning are especially apparent when a transition is in process: when a Merovingian king is forced to cut his long hair as punishment; when a female saint miraculously grows hair on her body or face; when a man entering a monastery tonsures his head, and a woman joining a convent veils, or cuts off, her hair. The appearance of hair—whether it is long or short, carefully combed or unkempt, veiled or exposed, on the head or elsewhere on the face or body—helped to shape gender identity, both in artistic representation and in real life.

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