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TRANSLATION AS CONVERSION, OR MAKING THE PHOENIX "MALE":
CHRISTIANITY AND GENDER IN THE
OLD ENGLISH PHOENIX AND ITS SOURCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Translation as Conversion, or Making the Phoenix “Male”:
Christianity and Gender in the Old English Phoenix and Its Source

by Deborah J. Ausman

The Old English poem The Phoenix and its fourth century source, De Carmen de Ave Phoenice, have traditionally been read together as allegories on Christian resurrection. I read these poems against each other to show how they engage tantalizing debates about gender distinction, which raged in phoenix mythological commentaries and within the Christian church during the first millennium ACE. I consider the Old English poem not merely a translation of the Carmen, but a conversion. First, the Old English author “converts” a predominantly pagan poem, which, I posit, may be linked to the Egyptian cult goddess, Isis, into a resurrection allegory, placed squarely within the Germanic mythos. But more importantly, the Old English author makes the text “male,” converting a text that offers the possibility of a world without gender categories into a text that not only preserves gender categories, but appropriates “female” reproductive power into a male, homosocial sphere.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Translation as Conversion, or Making the Phoenix "Male": Christianity and Gender in the Old English *Phoenix* and Its Source 1

II. Notes 46

III. Select Bibliography 59
Translation as Conversion, or Making the Phoenix “Male”:
Christianity and Gender in the Old English Phoenix and Its Source

To paraphrase a critic writing in 1976, The Phoenix is not an enigmatic poem (Bugge, 332). Almost 20 years later, this comment also accurately describes the state of criticism on The Phoenix. The poem reads as a completely straightforward allegory for the resurrection; criticism of the poem, not surprisingly, is for the most part just as predictable and unproblematic. Most studies either focus on the structure of The Phoenix, comment on its authorship, or offer additional ways to interpret its symbology.¹ All of them, however, unquestioningly accept the traditional three-dimensional allegorical reading of the poem offered by J.E. Cross in 1967: the poem has a moral level (where the bird represents the good Christian in his earthly nest), an analogical level (where the bird represents the Christian in heaven), and an allegorical level (where the bird represents Christ) (134).

I do not plan to take issue with this traditional reading. On the contrary, I find, as do most Old English scholars, that such a reading provides a useful, if somewhat uninspired, way of understanding The Phoenix. My goal is to rescue the poem from the enigmatic vacuum that critics have allowed it to occupy for two decades. Performing this rescue means looking not just at what The Phoenix’s anonymous author wrote, but at the choices he made when he decided to translate Lactantius’s fourth century De Carmen de Ave Phoenice from Latin into Anglo-Saxon. While several critics have commented on the differences between these two poems, pointing out the Old English author’s “obsessive” interest in the Day of Judgment and “precise omission of [Lactantius’s] references to the
sun cult,"² few have explored what these differences might mean. Only Carol F. Heffernan has attempted an extended analysis of the imagery in both poems, though even she can only hope that her book “will be provocation to new research that will discuss why images with an obviously pagan foundation could be so easily transformed for the use of Christian allegory” (1988, 15). Regrettably, her insights have been largely ignored.

Rather than simply accepting, as one critic does, that the rich resurrection imagery surrounding the phoenix legend made the Old English poem inevitable (Shaw, 158), I decided to explore whether this legend in particular might have needed allegorization. At Heffernan’s “provocation,” I studied what she called the “gynecological imagery” in the Carmen and the phoenix legend. I found that the imagery connotes not simply what Heffernan refers to as the pagan and the female, but specifically hearkens to Isis, the divine center of a popular cult that competed fiercely with Christianity to become the state religion of the Roman Empire. Unlike Heffernan, however, I do not believe that the Old English author integrates these images easily into The Phoenix; rather, the author seems determined to excise and reinterpret them. Instead of simply Christianizing the phoenix legend through allegory, the Old English author’s translation regenders the legend, “converting” the reproductive power Lactantius’s phoenix into a heroic, resurrective, and ultimately, masculine symbol of Christianity.

In this paper, I explore what this conversion reveals about the priorities and assumptions of the early Christian church. Just as female saints and religious women were urged to “become male” in order to attain salvation, the phoenix (both the figure itself and the poem describing it) must “become male” to serve the educational and inspirational needs of male, Germanic converts to Christianity.³ The Old English author not only supplies male personal pronouns for the bird, but dresses the legend surrounding the phoenix in the heroic mythos familiar to readers of ninth century Anglo-Saxon vernacular
poetry. And yet even as the Old English translation strives to “become male,” the poem reveals both a destabilized gender identity and a discomfort with the defining and confining categories of “male” and “female” through the subjectivity of its central figure, the phoenix. Reading The Phoenix in this context offers an opportunity to link the notion of “becoming male” to Marjorie Garber’s recent attempts to theorize the transvestite figure as the sign of “category crisis”—“an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity” (17). As much as the early Christian church relied on gender difference to define its administrative, organizational, and spiritual goals, the categories it created were as arbitrary, elusive, and performative in the early medieval period as they are now. The phoenix figure reveals this instability, for if the Old English poem gives us yet another example of a “female” becoming “male,” it also shows us a “male” as heroicized and masculinized as the phoenix giving birth, becoming “female.”

Part I of this paper will provide the historical and mythological context that supports the rest of my analysis. After introducing the phoenix legend as it is told in the Carmen and The Phoenix, I will explore how the mythology of the phoenix engages the question of gender difference in terms of late classical and early Christian notions of gender and sexuality. In Part II, Heffernan’s exploration of the “gynecological imagery” in the Carmen serves as a starting point for my hypothesis that Lactantius’s imagery recalls aspects of the cult of Isis and explicitly links the bird to the reproductive female. Part III considers The Phoenix as a translation, rather than a paraphrase—as a deliberate attempt to convert the reproductive power of the Carmen and the phoenix legend in general into a Christian symbol with a heroic mythos familiar to the male Anglo-Saxon community. And finally, in Part IV, I double back on my arguments in the first three sections to show how the phoenix figure represented in the Old English poem actually disrupts gender categories. The phoenix does not so much become male as perform male, and in a way
similar to Marjorie Garber's transvestites, calls into question the comfortable binarity so prized by the early Christian church.

I

For reasons that critics are still trying to fathom, the myth of the phoenix has proven a resilient and powerful metaphor that spans time and culture. Even today, the golden bird that rises from the flames of its own burning body signifies rebirth and survival. The myth that we recognize today, however, did not spontaneously generate as its fiery subject does; rather, as Van den Broek's encyclopedic examination of the legend has shown, the phoenix myth was developed and elaborated upon by Greek, Roman, and early Christian authors. These authors added details to the scant framework provided by Egyptian mythology, chronicling specifically what the bird looked like, where it lived before rebirth, how the generation process occurred, and even what the bird ate.

The fourth century *De Carmen de Ave Phoenice* ("Song Concerning the Bird Phoenix") represents one of the most comprehensive late classical retellings of the phoenix legend. Lactantius, a North African Christian convert to whom the poem is attributed, consolidates the material developed by Ovid, Tacitus, and earlier phoenix commentators into a brief, 170-line poem. The poem is divided into five distinct sections. The first section of the poem introduces the far-off land that the phoenix inhabits, particularly the grove of the sun, which features a fountain that floods the grove once a month. In the second section, Lactantius describes the phoenix's ritualistic behavior as it pays homage to the sun by bathing in the fountain and singing. The third section follows the phoenix on its journey to Syria and chronicles its regeneration. In the fourth section, the reborn bird carries its remains to "the City of the Sun" (Heliopolis), where it is venerated by the
people of Egypt. Lactantius uses the remaining ten lines of the poem to explain the
significance of the bird, and offers the following evaluation of its lifestyle.

a fortunate sortis finisque volucrem,
cui de se nasci praestitit ipse deus!

Ah, bird of happy lot and happy end to whom God’s own will has granted birth
from herself! (161-62)⁵

The first 380 lines of the Old English poem, which most Anglo-Saxon scholars now
view as written by a late ninth century contemporary of Cynewulf, is an elaborate
rephrasing of the Carmen.⁶ In the remaining 293 lines, the poet examines the legend
exegetically, lending moral, analogical, and allegorical significance to the bird’s life and
positioning the phoenix as an example to be emulated by all aspiring Christians. That the
poet retains much of the structure and flow of the Carmen in the first part of The Phoenix
attests to the adaptability of the legend. While this author was certainly not the first
Christian to interpret the phoenix legend allegorically, The Phoenix is generally regarded
as one of the most complete exegetical analyses written in the first millennium. The author
divides the first half of the poem into the same five sections as the Carmen, adding minor
details and commentary to align the poem better with his agenda. The only significant
additions to the Old English poem are 1) a change in the bird’s itinerary (the phoenix
makes a stop on its way to Syria) and 2) a lengthy discussion that compares the phoenix’s
regeneration with harvesting and sowing crops. I will discuss the significance of these
additions, along with the Old English author’s more subtle changes to the poem, as this
paper progresses.

Because the Carmen and The Phoenix tell the same story in almost exactly the same
way, one poem or the other frequently drops from discussion. In mythological contexts,
the *Carmen* is viewed as one of the most important sources of the phoenix legend; in contrast, Van den Broek does not even mention *The Phoenix* in his index of sources for the legend. Medievalists, on the other hand, tend to study the *Carmen* only as a source for the Old English poem and fail to consider how *The Phoenix* augments contemporary accounts of the phoenix legend. Understanding these two poems as two distinct stages in the development of the phoenix legend, though, allows us to see how they informed and/or grew out of some of the philosophical debates that phoenix commentators engaged in.

In particular, these two poems reflect shifting attitudes towards sexuality and gender early in the common era. As the phoenix legend developed in the early classical period, the assumption that the bird reproduced asexually was primarily an artifact of the bird’s uniqueness (Van den Broek, 357). Being the only bird of its kind, the phoenix had no partner with which to mate sexually. The bird’s singularity and forced asexuality led phoenix commentators to wonder whether asexual reproduction made the bird sexless (neither male nor female) or androgynous (both male and female). For some, the gender of the bird became the sign of its uniqueness, the marker that separated it from all other creatures. One classical author, for example, claims that when the bird arrives at the temple in Heliopolis, it proves its identity to the priest of the temple by displaying its genitalia (Van den Broek, 364-65).

The distinction between sexlessness and androgy, as taken up by phoenix commentators, is not trivial. Early Christian formulations of gender difference, which were developing in tandem with the phoenix legend, also relied on this distinction. As Elizabeth Castelli has articulated, early Christian authors saw a clear distinction between oneness, where gender distinction was erased, and androgy, where the genders of male and female were blended (32). Unlike many of today’s religious leaders, who routinely petition
converts to eschew the accouterments of sexuality, early Christian proselytizers did not imagine a sexless world. Rather, they aimed for an ideal state that merged the two sexes into a “higher, perfect unity” (Van den Broek, 360). Perhaps the most famous statement outlining this world without categories was made by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians: “For those of you that were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”7 In Paul’s vision, gender distinction is merely an artifact of the Fall, a state imposed upon Adam and Eve after their transgression and signaled when the first man and woman suddenly felt ashamed about their nakedness. For Paul, Christ’s sacrifice returns humans to the prelapsarian state that allows male and female elements to exist once again in a perfectly unified being.

Paul’s statement is often quoted to counter claims that the Christian church was hostile to women. In fact, the desire to verify the sentiments that Paul expressed to the Galatians has led historians to examine closely the roles that women played in the early development of the Christian church. These studies have revealed that women were welcomed by the growing church and encouraged to play an active role in its development.8 But even as the church encouraged women’s participation, the ideal espoused by Paul was being rewritten by his descendants. As Castelli argues, “Paul’s notion that Christian identity destabilizes the markers of cultural, social, or gender identity is undeveloped” (30). Later writers still believed that humans would achieve gender unification through Christ. But increasingly, the ideal itself was described not as a merging of two genders, but as a movement toward one gender: male. Philo Judaeus, an Egyptian Jewish philosopher whose efforts to reconcile Judaism and Platonism informed the Christian tradition, describes the soul’s progress to higher virtue in explicitly gendered terms.
It is fitting and proper for it [the soul] to bring together these (elements) which have been divided and separated, not that the male thoughts may be made womanish, and relaxed by softness, but that the female element, the senses, may be made manly by following masculine thoughts and receiving them from seed for procreation, that it may perceive (things) with wisdom, prudence, justice, and courage, in sum, with virtue.\(^9\)

Philo Judaeus does not mince words, describing the reunification of “female” and “masculine” quite clearly as a movement from female to male. Other authors were not quite as blatant, but the results are the same. In the writings of the church fathers, particularly St. Jerome, and hagiographical authors, saintly women and religious women are viewed as “becoming male” as they achieve salvation.\(^{10}\) Interestingly, this trope sets up a difficult contradiction. On the one hand, the idea of becoming male is presented as a return to a prelapsarian state where gender difference does not exist. But, simultaneously, the trope “reinscribes traditional gender hierarchies of male over female and masculine over feminine” (Castelli, 33).

We can see this contradiction play itself out in the development of the phoenix legend during the early Christian period. The bird at once represents prelapsarian humanity through its asexuality and thus becomes a symbol for solitary, virginal, male religious figures. Consider the following description from the epistle of Pseudo-Titus, written by a probable contemporary of Lactantius:

O man, who understands nothing at all of the fruits of righteousness, why has the Lord created the divine phoenix and not given it a little wife, but allowed it to remain in loneliness. Manifestly only on purpose to show the standing of virginity, that young men, remote from intercourse with women, should remain holy.\(^{11}\)
For this author, the phoenix is not the only being that takes on a specifically male gender. Saints, as well, become male—only young men who remove themselves from the company of women are afforded holy status. The author does not consider that, to remain virgins, some saints (Perpetua, for example) might need to refrain from intercourse with men.

Considering the phoenix’s shifting gender position throughout the development of the legend, along with the unquestionable relationship between the Carmen and the Old English Phoenix, it is surprising that no one has chosen to examine the poems in the context of gender. Perhaps this is because some editors, such as Benjamin Thorpe, gender the Old English bird as neuter, even though the Old English text continually refers to the bird with masculine pronouns, as in the following lines:

Donne he gewiteð  

his ealdne eard  

wongas secan, of þisse eþaltyr.

Then he sets out from these lands to seek his expansive ancient homelands (320-21). 12

For whatever reason, critics do not seem troubled by the gender difference in these two related poems, trusting, it appears, the disclaimers offered by each poet. Lactantius writes, “Femina vel mas hacc, seu neutrum, seu sit utrumque, / felix quae veneris foedera nulla colit” (163-64, “Female or male she is, which you will—whether neither or both, a happy bird, she regards not any unions of love”), while the Old English poet states, “God ana wat, / Cyning ælmhig hu his gecynde bið, / wifhades þe were” (355-57, “God alone, the King almighty, knows what his gender is, female or male”). Carol Heffernan, the only critic to engage the question of gender difference in these poems directly, concludes that the bird represents a bisexual unity such as that offered by Van den Broek:
The indeterminate gender of the phoenix... operates like the androgynous nature of the Neolithic Bird Goddesses that, far from excluding the creative potential of the female, includes that of the male (103).

Her explanation works fine in theory, just as similar explanations satisfied the early church fathers. But in practice, particularly that of classical philosophers and early Christian theologians, asexual reproduction such as that employed by the phoenix is typically expressed as male-male generation. Such conclusions are, in fact, quite logical—if the soul progresses toward a male ideal, then certainly men must also play the more important role in reproduction. The “one-sex” model discussed by Thomas Laqueur served “as an exercise in preserving the father,” as a way of explaining the apparent preeminence of men socially, politically, and culturally.13

We can see that the Old English poet conceives of bisexual unity in gendered terms when, only a few lines after his indeterminate gender disclaimer, he envisions an idealized, masculine reproductive process that quite clearly excludes the female.

Bið him selȝ gehwæðer
sunu ond swæs fæder ond symle eac
eft yrfeweard ealdre lafe.

He is himself both his own son and dear father, and always too the inheritor again of his old remains (374-76).

The Christological meaning of these lines is clear—the bird is like Christ, who was both God and son of God. But the implications of this association go beyond mere exegetical assertions. Perhaps more than any other example, the mythos surrounding Christ’s birth engages the one-sex model. Here, father and son are literally one, passing through Mary as
if she were merely a necessary stage in their mutual development. In fact, Mary’s role in Christ’s birth was a hotly debated topic among scholars throughout the first millennium of Christianity. If we view these debates in the context of Nancy Jay’s assertion that blood sacrifice rituals, including communion and, to some extent, baptism, provide a way for men to do birth better, “on purpose and on a more spiritual level” (294), we can see that story of Christ’s birth provides the church fathers with a collective homosocial memory that corrects Eve’s role in humanity’s reproductive history.14 Or, to phrase this relationship in the form of a familiar litany, through God, all men are reborn in Christ.

In these lines, the Old English poet not only upholds the one-sex model, but further appropriates the phoenix’s unique reproductive ability into a male homosocial community that both binds father and son together and provides a tidy way to pass on wealth, property, and uncontaminated male seed from generation to generation. Mothers and daughters are unashamedly absent. In the world described in these lines, the phoenix not only gives birth to itself, but establishes itself as its own heir. The Old English poet does not consider reproduction as a natural process, or even a singular reproductive event, but as part of a larger social schema that echoes the comitatus ethic so valued in Germanic societies. Within the retainer system, men seek out, serve, and promote the interests of other men. Women, as in other homosocial communities, have value only as objects of exchange, peace weavers that link men to other men.15 Elsewhere in this poem, the author positions the phoenix as a high-ranking member of the retainer system, as I will show later in this paper. Suffice it to say that here, toward the end of the section describing the bird, the Old English poet uses the phoenix to exemplify a type of reproduction between men.

The language employed by the Old English poet differs significantly from the corresponding description in the Carmen, which comfortably positions the bird’s indeterminate gender as a combination of both genders. "Ipsa sibi proles, suus est pater et
suus heres, / nutrix ipsa sui, semper alumna sibi” (167-68, “Herself she is her own offspring, her own sire and her own heir, herself her own nurse, her own nurseling [sic] evermore”). Unlike the Old English poet, Lactantius does not privilege one gender over another in his representation of the phoenix. Rather, his bird embodies qualities of both genders (sire and heir, wet-nurse and female child), and fluctuates in a “happy” (felix) stasis between male and female. Lactantius’s phoenix not only captures the essence of bisexual unity lauded by the church fathers and described by Van den Broek and Heffernan, but maintains its purity in the process—“quae veneris foedera nulla colit” (164, “[The bird] regards not any unions of love”). Lactantius also seems quite comfortable with the phoenix’s indeterminacy, as indicated by the word choice in his gender disclaimer, “Femina vel mas haec, seu neutrum, seu sit utrumque, / felix” (163-64, “Female or male she is, which you will—Whether neither or both, happy”). The conjunction “vel” along with the “seu. . . seu” clause themselves indicate indeterminacy. The phoenix does not seem to care what gender it is, and neither, Lactantius implies, should we. But the Old English poem even disallows happy ambiguity, as another look at the Old English gender disclaimer shows. “God ana wat, / Cyning ælmihtig hu his gecynde bið, / wifhades þe weres” (355-57, “God alone, the King almighty, knows what his gender is, female or male”). Gone is the indeterminacy of the Carmen, the nonchalant “What you will” that provides additional gender options to “male” and “female.” Here, the phoenix is either male or female, and while we are unable to identify its precise gender, God can. Unlike its “happy” predecessor that lives in bisexual bliss, the Old English bird, at least in God’s eyes, is finally one gender or the other.

To summarize, in the “disclaimers” offered by the authors of the Carmen and the Old English Phoenix, the gender of the phoenix figure shifts remarkably, moving from a comfortable, almost idyllic bisexuality to a socially and religiously prescribed masculinity.
This analysis raises important questions. Why would it be important for the Old English phoenix to “have” a gender? And if so, is it safe to call “male” the gender of choice? One way to answer these questions is to return to an examination of gender distinctions within the developing Christian church. Ironically, while gender difference was considered by early patristic authors to be “characteristic of the fallen status of human beings,” Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that gender is an important, well-articulated notion in men’s religiosity. The church fathers wrote about transcending gender distinction in the Kingdom of Heaven and welcomed women into the early church. But simultaneously, these authors developed doctrines that identified the female with lust, deception, and the Fall. For example, while Paul insists in his statement to the Galatians that categories are meaningless to Christ, his doctrines on sexuality fuel the patristic theology “that legitimizes the gradual exclusion of women from ecclesiastic structures, from sanctity, from the intellectual centers of monasticism, and eventually from the political spheres of daily life” (Gravdal, 21). By the fourth century, when Christianity became the official state religion of Rome, Eve’s role in the Fall and the ritual impurity of women were being used as excuses not only for excluding women from leadership positions in the Church, but also for enforcing celibacy among priests. For authors like Jerome and Chrysostom, the “becoming male” trope was explicitly linked with women’s impurity and sinfulness—women achieved equality with men only when they removed themselves from the supposedly dangerous and reprehensible characteristics that their forebears had associated with femaleness. Opportunities for women within the Church decreased as a strong ecclesiastical organization emerged and the church became, in the words of Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, “a large, complex, inflexible bureaucracy” (120). The Carolingian period of the eighth and ninth centuries, in particular, placed tight controls on the behavior of and opportunities afforded to religious women. Not surprisingly, fewer and fewer women chose to devote themselves to religious vocations during this period.
As Christianity became more organized toward the end of the first millennium, gender had turned into an important method of categorization within male religiosity. Social and religious activities were divided by gender and practitioners were kept separate from each other, which prevented women from participating in Christianity’s ongoing growth. As Bynum explains, “In creation of ideas of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness,’ ‘heroine’ or ‘heretic,’ those with greater access to means of communication and to raw power contribute in disproportionate ways” (17). Thus, the female, unknown to the church fathers because its voice had been excluded from Christianity, came to be associated with irrationality, sin, and the body. Some historians even read the gendering of the Christian church as an attempt to control the female body and define male responses to it. In attempting to shape the jumbled tenets of early Christianity into an ordered, hierarchical community, the church fathers also needed ways to enclose, explain, and define such frighteningly unknown concepts as chaos, birth, and death. Gender, and the corresponding social roles assigned to it, served as a tidy way to control and order many aspects of the human experience.

Viewing the Old English Phoenix in this historical context, a context certainly relevant if we accept that the poem was written during the height of the Carolingian reforms, provides rationale for its undeniably Christian author. The phoenix figure has tremendous exegetical possibilities. But, considering this period’s obsession with order and hierarchy, it is not surprising that when the author rewrote the Carmen, he removed the “happy ambiguity” that could disturb members of his audience. This phoenix, unlike its predecessor, must fit into a category. And the author of this poem not only expects the phoenix to fill a particular gender category, but assumes or at least expects that this category will be male. The expectations take an ironic turn, though, when one considers how the imagery and language throughout the rest of the Carmen influence the phoenix’s
gender indeterminacy. In the second part of this paper, I will examine how the poem signals the reproductive female through its associations with the Egyptian cult of Isis.

II

To argue suddenly that Lactantius’s phoenix is just as gendered as the Old English bird may seem irresponsible considering my earlier insistence on its “happy ambiguity.” But I am well aware of this apparent discrepancy. The difference between my discussion in Part I and the one I am about to undertake concerns, to use a loaded term, intentionality. The gender disclaimers analyzed previously reveal where gender lies in each author’s set of priorities. For Lactantius, the phoenix’s gender is an effect—his gender disclaimer casts aside questions of the bird’s gender. In the end, the Carmen is much more concerned with relating the bird’s unique existence, and its freedom from the emotionally draining task of maintaining relationships with others of its kind. The Old English author’s gender disclaimer, however, positions gender as a much more pressing concern, something to be explained and enforced. Both birds are gendered, as the pronouns used throughout each poem reveal. But, more importantly, we can view the Carmen as a gendered poem—its language and imagery associates it with the reproductive female. Ultimately, what is most interesting about these poems is not that this gendering exists, but the way in which it is translated from the Carmen to the Old English poem.

Carol Heffernan is the first (and to my knowledge, only) critic to consider the Carmen and The Phoenix as “gendered” poems. Heffernan refers to her thesis as a “daring proposal,” and considering the critical company that her book joined in 1988, one can easily agree with her description. In the end, however, her argument is remarkably tame. Heffernan identifies interlacing, “potent” images in both the Carmen and The Phoenix that “[draw] on female initiation rites and early scientific theories connected with
menstruation, conception, and birth” (14). For Heffernan, the feminine Carmen informs The Phoenix’s Christianity, and within the latter poem, feminine and masculine coexist in a bisexual unity that parallels the bird’s unique lifestyle.

Pressured by its placement within an allegorical context the feminine dimension of Lactantius’s predominantly pagan poem is so jostled that... Mariology invades Christology... [The phoenix’s] movement toward conception makes possible its own renewal and, as an embodiment of Mary (and the Church), that of all humanity (102).

For Heffernan, the Carmen’s “feminine” imagery (which she finds comes primarily from certain North African tribal rituals) aligns with and complements the Christological purpose of the poem. And she carefully clarifies that the “Marian potential of the symbolism,” and, finally, her “daring” argument, do not and should not compete with traditional readings of The Phoenix.

My exploration of this dimension of the poem is not intended to stand as the interpretation, supplanting currently held scholarly opinion; I am merely following one of two parallel lines in the poem: Mary and Christ, Incarnation and Resurrection, coordinates in the drama of salvation (103, her italics).

Heffernan’s language in this section disappoints, considering her bold attempts throughout her book to offer a unique and insightful look at both the Carmen and the Phoenix. She undercuts herself, assuring her readers that her analysis neither “supplants” other readings nor “stands” on its own. Instead, her reading simply supports what has come before, completing the picture to make traditional readings of The Phoenix “whole.”21 Perhaps not surprisingly, the same readings that Heffernan is unwilling to supplant but willing to
support have refused to allow her reading to stand with them—her book has been largely ignored by Anglo-Saxonists.

While her final argument may not go as far as it might, Heffernan does offer some rather “daring” insights about the treatment of gender in the Carmen and The Phoenix, and it is unfortunate that more scholars have not begun to recognize and explore the significance of the “gynecological imagery” that she identifies in these poems. Granted, much of Heffernan’s evidence seems to cry out for dismissal. Though she is quick to explain that the tribal initiation rituals, which she views as informing the feminine imagery, change little over time and remain relatively constant between cultures, she asks quite a bit to hope that the ordinary Anglo-Saxon scholar will accept that Lactantius’s poem includes imagery borrowed from North American tribal ceremonies or Australian aboriginal rites. Much of the evidence that she cites, provocative as it may be, seems foreign and distant from the medieval world. But Heffernan need not have traveled so far abroad to find evidence that the phoenix legend at times embodies the reproductive female.

For example, Heffernan notes that at two points during the Carmen and The Phoenix, the phoenix intentionally secludes itself from other animals. The first instance of seclusion comes during the initial sequence of the poem, which Heffernan links to menstruation due mainly to the fountain’s monthly overflow (the bird bathes in the fountain). The second instance of seclusion comes just before the bird’s rebirth; the bird isolates itself in a palm tree and rather obsessively constructs an elaborate nest. Heffernan, not surprisingly, links this instance to pregnancy. To support her claims, Heffernan notes a variety of obscure tribal rituals, which mandate seclusion for menstruating and pregnant women (95-97). But Heffernan fails to mention that the growing Christian church mandated similar isolation, particularly during the period in which the Old English version of the poem was written. The Penitentials, which guided priests in assigning penances between the sixth and twelfth
centuries, required men and women to abstain from sexual contact during menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation. And while the phoenix certainly avoids much more than sex as it carefully isolates itself from other animals, perhaps the bird is familiar with the text from which the Christian policy probably originated—Leviticus. It specifies that women should not even be touched while menstruating, instructing, "Anyone who touches a receptacle after she has sat (on it) must wash his clothing and wash himself with water and will be unclean until evening." This paranoid insistence on women’s uncleanness explains why men were forbidden from attending childbirth well into the sixteenth century, "For a man is not permitted to do these things, nor to investigate or feel women’s hands, breasts, stomach, feet, etc. On the contrary, a man ought to avoid the secrets of women and fly from their intimate association as much as he can." During most of the medieval period, pregnant women gave birth isolated in rooms with midwives, forbidden even from attending church to give thanks for the birth of their child. Thus, as the phoenix carefully isolates itself from other birds, preoccupied with what could be called its "condition," it is difficult not to conceive of the bird as pregnant.

Tum legit aerio sublimem vertice palman,

.................................................................

in quam mulla nocens animans prorepere possit,
lubricus aut serpens aut avis ulla rapax.

.................................................................

Protinus instructo corpus mutabile nido
vitaliue toro membra vieta locat.

Then she chooses a palm-tree towering with airy crest... against it no hurtful living creature could steal forth, or slippery serpent, or any bird of prey...
Forthwith in the nest she has furnished she sets her body that awaits its change—
withered limbs on a life-giving couch (\textit{Carmen}, 69-72, 89-90).

\begin{verbatim}
Him se clæna ðær
odscafeð scearplice ðæt he in scade weardæ
on wudubearwe wæste stowe
biholene ond bihydde hæleþa monegum.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
Bīð him neod micel
ðæt he þa yldu ofestum mote
þurh gewíttes wylm wendan to life,
feorg geong onfon.
\end{verbatim}

There the chaste bird quickly hastens away from them in order to occupy a
deserted place shadowed within a grove of tress, concealed and hidden from
numbers of mortals. . . . It is to him much desired that he old age then, with haste,
may, through a burning desire of the mind, turn to life, a young life to take (\textit{The
Phoenix}, 167-170, 189-192).

It is not my intent to render each of Heffernan’s points to clarify their relevance to
Christian doctrine during the early medieval period. Rather, I wanted to point out how one
of her conclusions about the feminine imagery in the \textit{Carmen} and \textit{The Phoenix} can be
supported by evidence much more familiar to Old English scholars. Many of the
observations that Heffernan makes offer legitimate, and quite unique, readings of both
poems. She ties many of the phoenix’s reproductive preparations to popular medieval
practices. For example, she notes that the herbs collected by the phoenix in the \textit{Carmen}
resemble those collected for fumigation pots. Early gynecological theories held that the
uterus was attracted to pleasant odors and repelled by foul ones. Thus, pots of pleasant
smelling herbs and flowers were frequently burned below a woman’s vagina to entice the
baby out of the womb.\textsuperscript{23} Heffernan’s conclusions are certainly worth reconsidering.

More important, though, is some imagery that Heffernan fails to note. Early in her
book, Heffernan summarizes legends of “menstrual birds,” tying them to different
initiation rituals and cult practices. She touches briefly on the Egyptian goddess and cult
heroine, Isis, noting a link between the Egyptian \textit{benu} (a prototypical phoenix) and the
star, Sothis. Heffernan writes, “I am not aware of any direct relationship between the benu
and the goddess beyond their mutual symbolic links to the star Sothis” (1988, 38).
Unfortunately, Heffernan has failed to note some extremely rich connections between the
phoenix and the cult of Isis that figure quite strikingly in Lactantius’s version of the
phoenix legend.

Would Lactantius have been familiar with this cult? Almost certainly. The cult of Isis
was a flourishing and extremely popular cult in the late Roman Empire, one with which
Lactantius must have been familiar. Particularly after its official recognition by Caligula
(37-41 ACE), the cult spread throughout the Mediterranean and even as far as England.
Hadrian, in particular, helped feed the Isis movement, erecting temples to Isis and her
husband, Osiris, in Egypt and Rome after his lover, Antinous, drowned and was linked to
Osiris. In fact, artifacts and ruins excavated in Herculaneum and Pompeii indicate that the
cult competed directly with Christianity during the first two centuries of the common era.
The activity and popularity of the cult worried many classical thinkers; Ovid, Juvenal,
Seneca, and Augustine each retaliated by mocking its rituals. But Lactantius appreciated
the power of the cult, and, rather than mocking it, used it as an example of the devotion
 accorded to the founders of cities by their citizens, whether the founders were “men
notable for their bravery or women remarkable for their chastity; so Egypt worshipped Isis
with the greatest veneration.” By this time, though, Isis had succumbed to the competition; proponents of Christianity had labeled Isis worship heretical, and her cult was gradually disappearing. This context provides some interesting readings of Lactantius’s fourth-century poem. Lactantius does not merely choose to rewrite the story of the phoenix, but uses it as a medium to record aspects of a dying goddess. I do not intend to suggest that Lactantius was an Isis worshipper himself. But consider the precedent set in 437 ACE by Quodvultdeus, one of Augustine’s pupils. In *De promissionibus et predictionibus dei*, Quodvultdeus reminisces about Caelestis, a cult goddess who was particularly powerful in Carthage.

In Africa, at Carthage, Caelestis... had a vast temple... It had been closed for a long time, fenced in and obscured by wild thorny thickets, when the Christian people wanted to appropriate it for the service of the true religion... Even the voice of Caelestis, destroyed now by the Vandals, was left without memory. Just as Quodvultdeus could find room in his Christian heart to note Caelestis’s passing with sadness, Lactantius may have used the *Carmen* as a medium to give Isis her “swan song,” if you will. His rewriting of the phoenix myth not only tells an entertaining story of the legend, but also bids farewell to a cult that had mesmerized the Mediterranean for generations.

Discovering the links between Isis and the phoenix requires a short course in Egyptian religion. Many critics have noted the phoenix’s relationship to Heliopolis, as described in the *Carmen*: “Quam pedibus gestans contendit Solis ad urbem / inque ara residens ponit in aede sacra” (121-22, “Bearing this in her talons she speeds to the City of the Sun, and perching on the altar sets it in the hallowed temple”). N.F. Blake also reminds us that the temple of the sun-god, Rē, was located in Heliopolis (8). Why, then, has no one suggested
that the phoenix actually deposits her remains at this particular temple? The benu was, after all, one of the forms taken by Ré; the sun’s daily rebirth and death mimicked the benu’s own life cycle (Van Den Broek, 20). The connection to the sun-god is further strengthened when one reviews the opening lines of the Carmen. Lactantius refers to the sun directly three times in the first 12 lines of the poem. By the third mention, the personification “Sol” has been replaced with the appellation “Phaethonteis axis” (Phaethon’s car), and for the rest of the poem, Lactantius uses the name of a sun-god as important as Ré, Phoebus, to refer to the sun. In addition, the sun’s course across the sky blesses the land; it is “in primo felix oriente” (blessed by the first rising sun) and protected from the terrors that afflict the rest of the world.

In the Carmen, however, the phoenix does not quite correspond to the benu. An analysis of the bird’s behavior positions it more as a worshipper of Ré than one of his forms. For example, Lactantius describes the bird as “Paret et obsequitur Phoebo memoranda satelles” (33-34, “An acolyte worthy of record, she yields obedience and homage to Phoebus”). And throughout the poem, the phoenix’s behavior is dictated entirely by the sun’s progress across the sky. When Aurora (dawn) reddens the sky, the phoenix plunges into the fountain (35-38). When Phoebus starts to rise, the phoenix flies into a tree and waits for the first beams to flash across the sky (39-42). When the sun emerges, the bird begins to sing (43-50). And when the sun finally sets, the phoenix stops singing, except to record the passing of the hours (51-54).

We can explain this shift in the benu/phoenix’s subject position, from a form of Ré to a worshipper of Ré, by tracing changes in Egyptian religion. Worship of Ré, the preeminent god of the third and second millennia, began to lag toward the end of the second millennia, in favor of the more dynamic triad headed by Osiris, which also included his wife/sister, Isis, and their son, Horus. The roles played by the members of the triad
evolved significantly through the Hellenic period. Osiris, for example, is occasionally venerated as a sun-god, as is Horus, who the Greeks liken to Apollo. Isis’s role, on the other hand, not only remained constant, but actually afforded her with the most power in the triad. Early Egyptian accounts of the Isis/Osiris myth depict Isis as a grieving goddess, who laments the loss of her husband in a series mournful hymns. But as the myth develops, Isis serves not just as a wife and sister to Osiris, but as a type of mother who offers Osiris new life. Her associations with the moon and the overflowing Nile linked her to fertility and growth, while her patience in reconstructing Osiris’s mutilated body associated her with rebirth, justice, and order. Festivals honoring Isis, which were quite popular during the early-Roman period, reenacted her journey to save her husband with the “implication that, as Isis helped Osiris overcome the attack of his enemies, so Isis [would] aid her followers” (Kee, 128). In addition, birds, particularly the ibis, were a central symbol of the Isis cult. Isis’s influence was so powerful that she became one of the central figures of the Magna Mater cult. In Lucius Apuleius’s late second century *Metamorphoses*, which may or may not be an autobiographical account of Apuleius’s initiation into the cult of Isis, the convert explains that Isis comprises the fertility of Ceres, the beauty and love represented by Venus, the childbirthing responsibilities of Artemis, and serves as goddess of the underworld as does Proserpina.

But despite her influence as a powerful and charismatic goddess, what set Isis apart during the Graeco-Roman period was her association with the everyday concerns of the average woman. A series of Greek aretalogies (devotional manuscripts intended to account the virtues of a god or goddess) depict the goddess primarily, though not exclusively, as a goddess of and for women. Isis was the goddess who brought men and women together, allowed love and marriage to prosper, aided in childbirth, and protected the relationship between mother and child. In addition, Isis claimed to give women the
same power as men. Greek and Roman inscriptions reveal that female Isis worshippers respected the goddess’s commitment to her marriage, along with her interest in specifically feminine functions. Isis was a goddess that women could invoke during crises and whose life they could emulate.32

Isis’s devotion as a wife and mother position her as a powerful sun worshipper. Whether the object of her affections is her son or her husband, both of whom are described as sun gods by three different cultures, Isis’s associations with the sun, along with her connections to rebirth, birds, and Sothis, connect her to the phoenix, particularly when we consider the bird’s behavior in Lactantius’s poem. Take, for example, the following lines from the Carmen:

Atque eadem celeres etiam discriminat horas
innarrabilibus nocte dieque sonis,
antistes luci nemorumque verenda sacerdos
et sola arcantis conscia, Phoebe, tuis.

She it is also who marks off the swift hours by day and night in sounds which may not be described, priestess of the grove and awe-inspiring ministrant of the woods,
the only confidant of thy mysteries, Phoebus (55-58).

Why describe the phoenix as an “antistes”? Recall that earlier accounts of the phoenix typically depict it as male;33 Lactantius not only feminizes the bird, but simultaneously elevates it to the status of religious official, an unusual position for a woman to occupy, particularly in the religious climate of the fourth century. The appellation makes much more sense, though, when one considers that a primary feature of the cult of Isis was the participation of women as officials.34 The behavior of the phoenix mimics the behavior of Isis worshippers—the bird’s joy as it observes the sun positions it either as Isis herself or a
priestess of the cult leading others in a ritual reenactment of Isis’s search for Osiris. The link to Isis also explains the bird’s intimate connection to Phoebus as his “sola arcanis conscia.” What closer tie is there than husband and wife or mother and son?

Lactantius also gestures toward Isiac ritual practices in his description of the phoenix’s behavior in the fountain. “Sed fons in medio, quem vivum nomine dicunt/perspicuus, lenis, dulcisuber aquis” (25-26, “But there is a well in the midst, the well of life they call it, crystal-clear, gently flowing, rich in its sweet waters”). Due to Isis’s association with the Nile and her recovery of Osiris’s body from the river where his brother left him to drown, water played a central role in the Isis cult. In De Iside et Ostride, Plutarch notes the potency of water and its importance to Egyptian cult practice: “They call not only the Nile but all moisture generally the efflux of Osiris, and in honor of the god the water-pitcher always leads the procession of the sacred ceremonies” (36:1). Ablution and bathing were particularly important to the cult during initiation, so much so that the first thing one Isis convert thinks after his first encounter with the goddess is to sprinkle himself with water. In fact, historians speculate that Christian baptism may have developed from the initiation practices of Isiacs. Lactantius’s description of the phoenix punningly hints at this connection: compelled by the rising sun (son), “Ter quater illa pias immergit corpus in undas, ter quater illa e vivo gurgite libat aquam” (37-38, “Thrice and again that bird plunges her body into the kindly waves, thrice and again sips water from the living flood”). But even more strikingly, the description also suggests a compulsion reminiscent of an earlier passage in the account of Apuleius’s initiation. When Apuleius rises the morning of the initiation, his first inclination is to bathe:

Confestimque discussa pigra quiete lactus et alacer exurgo meque protius
purificandi studio marino lavacro trado septiesque summerso fluctibus capite, quod
cum numerum praecipue religionibus aptissimum divinus ille Pythagoras prodidit.
So shaking off at once my torpid slumber, I gladly and eagerly arose and, anxious to purify myself, I went to bathe in the sea. Seven times I plunged my head under the waves, since the divine Pythagoras pronounced that number to be very specially suitable in sacred rites. (1:21-25). 37

Reading the Carmen in light of Hefferman’s observations and my discovery of the poem’s possible connections to the cult of Isis clearly tie the poem not just to the female, but to the reproductive female. Hefferman and I part company, however, when it comes to looking at how this secondary subject of the Carmen is translated in the Old English poem. Hefferman decides that the “gynecological imagery” and “pagan” ritual practices that inform the Carmen invade the Old English poem as Mariological images that coexist with Christianity. I do not completely concur. While feminine vestiges certainly remain in The Phoenix, as my final argument about this poem will hold, I do not, as Hefferman does, believe that feminine and masculine comfortably coexist in the Old English poem. Rather, The Phoenix’s author seems determined to convert the legend of the phoenix offered by Lactantius into a masculine, heroic, and Christian fable for his Anglo-Saxon audience.

III

I intentionally refer to this rewriting as a “conversion,” for, as Evelyn Birge Vitz points out in her study of late medieval hagiography, vernacular works such as The Phoenix played an important role in converting “pagans” to Christianity. Vitz notes that “the requirement that a story about a saint be entertaining—that it be a ‘good story’—is markedly greater for vernacular works than for those in Latin” (99). To the average medieval reader, Latin served a formal, almost weighty purpose. In contrast, vernacular works, particularly translations of markedly Christian texts, spoke directly to an intended audience, and could unabashedly ask listeners either to convert to Christianity or affirm
their faith in God. Consequently, Vitz observes that fourteenth century *vitae* writers embellished their narratives and made them more personal, both to keep their readers’ interest and promote thoughtful consideration. As Vitz states, “Just as the bodies of the saints were ‘translated,’ transferred, from one place to another, making the healing power of the saint available to a new audience, so were the lives of the saints ‘translated,’ carried by narrators to a new tongue, a new audience, with a new set of needs and expectations” (100).

While striving to make their translations entertaining, Christian authors also felt compelled to ensure that the texts they translated were morally acceptable to their new audiences. Lori Chamberlain points out that this proviso frequently allowed Christian authors to take tremendous liberties with the texts in their charge in order to transform them from foreign or alien tales to familiar narratives. In the sixteenth century, for instance, Thomas Drant relates the task of rendering Horace into English to domesticating a captive woman:

> First I have now done as the people of God were commanded to do with their captive women that were handsome and beautiful: I have shaved off [Horace’s] hair and pared off his nails... I have pieced his reason, eked and mended his similitudes, mollified his hardness, prolonged his corollary kind of speeches, changed and much altered his words, but not his sentence, or at least (I dare say) not his purpose.\(^{38}\)

While Vitz and Chamberlain refer to late medieval and early Renaissance translation strategies, their arguments seem just as applicable to *The Phoenix’s* ninth-century anonymous chronicler. The Old English poet’s audience was no different from the audience that Alfred the Great addresses in his famous ninth century prefaces: a
decentralized, nonfeudal community of scholars and nobles bound by a powerful vernacular, oral tradition. In an attempt to make Latin texts more accessible to these men (for men were the only targets of their texts), both Alfred and the Old English poet couch Christianity within an Anglo-Saxon mythos. The stakes were high for both authors. While the Carolingian reforms had entrenched Christianity as Europe’s chief religion, the situation was much less stable in Anglo-Saxon England. Viking invasions had splintered what little national solidarity England possessed. Wars were also chipping away at Alfred’s political structure and were even beginning to threaten the Christian hierarchy. As Elizabeth Robertson has argued, Alfred’s educational reforms counter these threats—he consciously provides his audience with texts that explain and reinforce the fundamentals of Christianity (6). We can read The Phoenix as one of these texts, as a deliberate attempt to convert the reproductive power of the Carmen and the phoenix legend in general into a powerful symbol of Christianity that could also inherit features of the Anglo-Saxon mythos. The author converts the legend by making three different types of changes. The phoenix not only becomes a male bird, but a heroic figure in the tradition of Beowulf or Andreas. The unique reproductive ability of the bird is appropriated to support male reproductive fantasies. And, by far the most extensive changes to the poem remove or reinscribe the bird’s relationship to the sun, effectively diminishing the connections to Isis and, hence, weakening the poem’s associations with the reproductive female.

I am not the first critic to notice the distinctly Germanic character of The Phoenix. The opening line of the poem, “Hæbbe ic gefrunen,” which signals the opening of the epic poems Beowulf and Andreas, led many formalist critics to compare the language used in The Phoenix to that found in the epics. Shaw, for example, notes that the opening line “does not consciously call attention to a source,” as it typically does in the epics (the formula gave authors a way to validate their present narrative by referencing a source
from whom they had heard the tale). Rather, the line “serves to evoke a heroic sense” (Shaw, 156), a sense that is felt even more strongly when one considers the language studies offered by Cross and Blake. But what few critics notice is the effect that the heroic epithets and Germanic situations have on the phoenix figure. For the heroicization is not random, but specifically directed at the bird itself, revealed in what one critic refers to as the Old English poet’s “distinct tendency to anthropomorphize the phoenix... to give the bird characteristics which are more appropriate to men and heroes.”

Consider how the bird is introduced in The Phoenix.

Done wudu weardah        wundrum fæger
fugel feþrum strong,       se is fenix haten.

That wood inhabits a bird wondrously fair, strong of wing, he is called Phoenix (85-86).

The Old English poet immediately calls attention to the bird’s splendid appearance and strong wings, in a description that contrasts strikingly with the corresponding description of the bird in the Carmen—there, the single adjective “unica,” meaning “unique,” is applied to the bird. While the Old English poet gestures to this reference in the third line of his introduction, when he refers to the bird as “anhaga” (“reclusive” or “solitary”), he places the bird back into a heroic context only one line later: the bird is “deormod” (“brave of heart,” 88) in its isolation. The rest of the epithets applied to the bird during the opening sequence continue to emphasize the bird’s noble heritage, striking appearance, and physical strength. In the end, the Old English poet endows his phoenix with all of the features common to Anglo-Saxon epic heroes. The phoenix is strong, fair, independent, courageous, and completely unparalleled among his kinsfolk. Just as Beowulf is a warrior without equal, the Old English phoenix is “aflyhð fugla wyn” (“the best of birds,” 155).
The bird’s heroic appearance during the first 150 lines of *The Phoenix* culminates in one of the most blatantly Germanic portions of the poem, a section added to this account of the phoenix legend by the Old English poet. On the first leg of its journey to Syria, the bird stops briefly in a “rice” (“kingdom,” 156), where it acquires a warrior-like retinue that accompanies it to Syria.

\[ \text{Pær he ealdordom} \]

\[ \text{onfehð foremihtig} \]
\[ \text{geþungen on þeode,} \]
\[ \text{westen weardæþ.} \]

\[ \text{Fuglas þringað} \]
\[ \text{utan ymbe æþelne:} \]
\[ \text{æghwylc wille} \]
\[ \text{wesan þegn and þeow} \]
\[ \text{þeodne mærum.} \]

There he sovereignty receives, prepotent, over the race of fowl, exalted in the tribe, and dwells with them for awhile in the desert. . . . The birds throng around the noble [bird], each wants to be retainer and servant to the glorious lord (158-165, my translation).

The phoenix’s heroic attributes are translated into the social context prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon mythos—the Germanic *comitatus* system, a retainer system in which the most powerful members of society collected followers by promising protection, social advancement, and monetary compensation. Clearly, the phoenix ranks high in the *comitatus* system: the Old English author describes the bird as a “þeodne” (“lord”) with “ealdordom” (“sovereignty”) over his “cynn” (“race”). The addition of the heroic retinue accomplishes two things for the Anglo-Saxon author. First, it situates the phoenix squarely
within the *comitatus* system, which perhaps makes the fantastic account of the bird’s rebirth (which follows this sequence) much more palatable to the poet’s audience. But more importantly, the passage reinscribes Christianity into the *comitatus* system by way of the heroic phoenix figure. The poet will soon link the bird allegorically to the resurrected Christ—this passage, therefore, shows a Germanic audience that devotion to the Lord is no different than devotion to a lord.

The poet’s purpose becomes even more clear later in *The Phoenix*, when the Old English poet repeats the retinue scene in much greater detail (335-349). This passage does exist in the *Carmen*, but the word choice incorporated in *The Phoenix* translates the bird from a “raram volucrem” (152, “rare bird”) that is lauded by a “choro” (157, “chorus”) and a “turba” (152, “mob”) into a male Germanic hero followed by a loyal retinue of warriors. The Old English poet, for example, describes the company of birds as “heapum” (“in troops,” 336) and “preatum” (which can refer to generic crowds or to a military force, 341). And to reinforce the phoenix’s position within his militaristic retinue, the phoenix becomes a “cyning” (“king,” 344), a “leofne leodfruman” (“beloved chief,” 345), an “æœlæne” (“noble one,” 346), and a “guðfrecan” (“bold warrior,” 353). But coincident with the Germanic epithets, the Old English author refers to the phoenix as “þone halgan” (“the holy one,” 339), “duguða wyn” (“delight of the people,” 348), and “gesælīga” (“blessed one,” 350), words which set up the allegorical reading that begins just 40 lines later. By juxtaposing the Germanic and Christian epithets in the phoenix figure, the Old English author links Christianity to Germanic society, producing a resurrection narrative that reads as a heroic epic.

The phoenix legend works remarkably well as a resurrection narrative; the bird’s ability to reproduce itself serves as an apt metaphor for life after death. And simultaneously, the appropriation of the phoenix’s unique reproductive ability into a
Christian context allows the author to indulge in male reproductive fantasies. I have already shown that the Old English poet’s gender disclaimer not only masculinizes the bird’s reproductive process (making it an action whereby father produces son), but contextualizes it homosocially as a way to preserve patrilinearity. An examination of the birth sequence in the Old English poem reveals a similar preoccupation, though with singularly Germanic overtones. In the first place, the bird’s rebirth occurs on top of a hero’s funeral pyre. Recall that in the *Carmen*, the bird constructs a nest of herbs. In the Old English poem, the bird still collects herbs for the nest, though the author describes them as “torhte fætwe” (“bright treasure,” 200). In addition, the nest built by the bird more closely resembles the great halls visited by many an epic hero. The Old English poet describes the nest as a “hus” (“house,” 203 and 217), a “soleræ” (“upper chamber,” 204—for Anglo-Saxons, such rooms were considered a sign of great wealth, as multi-level dwellings were difficult to build and maintain), and a “willsele” (pleasant hall,” 214). The image of the “haswigfeðra / gemol gearum frod” (“gray-feathered bird, old and wise in years,” 154-55) lying on a nest surrounded by all its wealth and possessions recalls the ritual cremation of heroes such as Beowulf. And not surprisingly, the author refers to the burning nest as a “feorhhor” (literally, “life hoard,” 221) and characterizes the phoenix as a battle-weary warrior with the epithets “heoredreorges” (“bloody from battle,” 216) and “heðþoroþs” (“famed for excellence in battle,” 228).

By rewriting the phoenix’s rebirth within the context of heroic cremation, the Old English author appropriates the bird’s reproductive ability, putting it to use to illustrate the power of two important male institutions: the *comitatus* system and Christianity. The reinscription of the reproductive process for homosocial ends becomes even more clear when we note a curious passage that the Old English poet appends after the description of the bird’s regeneration. Even though this passage does not appear in Lactantius’s poem,
none of *The Phoenix*’s critics have commented on it. The passage is lengthy, but worth quoting here in full:

Sumes onlice

swa mon to ondleofene eordan wæsmas
on hærreste, ham gelædeð
wiste wynsume ær wintres cyme
on rypes timan, ðy læs hi renes scur
awyrde under wocnum; ðær hi wraðe metað,
fordorpege gefeon þonne forst ond snew
mid ofermaegne eorhæn þeccað
wintergewædum; of þam wæstnum sceal
eorla eadwelan eft alædan
þurh cornes gecynd, þe ær clæne bið
sæd onsawen, þonne sunnan glæm,
on lenctenne lifes tacen
weccæ woruldgestreon þæt þa wæstmas beoð,
þurh agne gecynd eft acende
foldan frætwe; swa se fugel weorþeð
gomel æfter gearum geong edniwe
flæsce bifongen.

In the same way that people carry home for food the fruits of the earth, delightful feasting, before winter comes at harvest time, lest the rain storms destroy them under the clouds, there they find satisfaction, the pleasure of eating, when frost and snow with overwhelming power cover the earth with winter garments, from those riches of noblemen will again grow, through the nature of the corn, which is first
sown as a pure seed when the gleam of the sun, the sign of life, in spring wakens
the world’s wealth, so that these fruits are, through their own nature, born again,
the adornments of the earth; so this bird, old after years, becomes young, and
clothed in renewed flesh (242-59).

The poet takes almost 30 lines (and creates one of the most poetic passages in the entire
poem) to liken the phoenix’s regeneration to the annual harvesting and sowing of seed.
While the constancy of agriculture is often figured as miraculous, to the poet the process
of tilling the land is clearly controlled by men. The corn’s nature may allow it to be reborn,
but the seeds themselves come, not from the earth, but are “of þam væstmum... eorlā”
(“from the riches of noblemen,” 250-51) and are planted and cared for by men. While I do
not wish to infer any intentionality on the part of the author, the addition of these lines
further reinforces the agricultural metaphor of human reproduction that appears in the
gender disclaimer later in this poem. The lines offer a vision of reproduction that preserves
the male’s role as bearer and planter of seed. And the preservation may in fact be
warranted when one considers the role, or rather the lack of a role, that seed plays in
Lactantius’s poem. In that poem, the phoenix plays an active role in her reproductive
process that contrasts strikingly with the passive, corpse-like bird in The Phoenix.

interea corpus genitali morte peremptum
aestuat et flammam parturit ipse calor,
aetherioque procul de lumine concipit ignem:
falgrat et embustum solvitur in cineres.
Quos velut in massam cineres umore coactos
conflat; et effectum seminis instar habet.
Meanwhile her body, by birth-giving death destroyed, is aglow, the very heat producing flame and catching fire from the ethereal light afar: it blazes and when burned dissolves into ashes. These ashes she welds together, as if they were concentrated by moisture in a mass, *possessing in the result what takes the place of seed* (*Carmen*, 95-100).

In the *Carmen*, the bird’s own body is the source of the flame—she starts the fire that initiates her rebirth. And as she burns, she actively pulls the remnants of her body together to construct the mass out of which the new phoenix will grow. The phoenix not only conducts the reproductive process on her own, but does so without seed, the all important source of life’s energy according to the reproductive theories popular in the fourth century. In fact, this sequence in the *Carmen* presents us with a virtually textbook description of Bahktin’s grotesque body, a body “in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.” For Bahktin, the image of the grotesque elides with the reproductive female, an active, changeable body that is quite different from the closed, smooth, and impenetrable male body.41 Whether the Old English poet was troubled by these associations or not, his agricultural metaphor reestablishes the seed as the fundamental component of regeneration and reasserts the importance of the male role in reproduction.

While the heroicization of the phoenix and the refiguring of the bird’s reproductive processes give the Old English poem a very different character from its Latin predecessor, by far the most extensive changes to the poem involve not additions but omissions. The Old English author meticulously refigures much of Lactantius’s poetic imagery, removing all of the references to pagan gods and mythology. He particularly excises references to the sun cult, resulting in, as one critic points out, “A lack of logical continuity in the itinerary” (Cross, 131), for its unclear how the “cyþu” (“native land,” 277) where the
phoenix leaves its remains differs from the lovely garden where we first meet the phoenix. In the Carmen, the phoenix returns to the temple at Heliopolis to deposit its remains at a temple (most likely the temple of the sun dedicated to the sun god, Ré, as I argued earlier in this paper). In the Old English poem, however, we are told only that the phoenix returns to a place that is “sunbeorht” (“bright with the sun,” 278). And rather than depositing its remains at a temple, the bird buries its remains in that “ealonde” (usually “island,” though Bradley translates the word as “land of rivers,” 287). The land remains anonymous and the connection to Ré, and consequently the link between the phoenix figure and Isis, are less apparent.

The Old English author not only removes this crucial reference to the sun-cult, but diminishes the power of the sun throughout his version of the legend, bestowing power instead upon the Christian God. This is quite evident when we compare the opening sequence of The Phoenix to the opening of the Carmen. The sun is mentioned four times in the first ten lines of the Carmen, and its radiance hovers over the land, protecting it from evil and dictating the behavior of the phoenix. In the Old English poem, however, another force is preeminent: “purh Meotudes meaht” (“the might of the ordaining Lord,” 6) protects the land from evil and the land was formed by the “Wyrhta” (“maker,” 9). The sun makes its first appearance in the poem as an absence, for in this land, the “sunnan hætu” (“the heat of the sun,” 17) never mars the serene landscape. Throughout the lengthy (85 line) introduction to the Old English poem, God rules over and the protects the land, commanding the trees to remain green, the fountain to overflow, and the trees to be laden with fruit year-round.

When the sun finally does appear in The Phoenix, it briefly captures the attention of the author, becoming an even more important subject than the phoenix. From lines 90-120, the author refers to the sun 15 times. The section opens and closes with the direct
reference “sunne;” kenning produces the other 13 references. While kenning was certainly a vital component of Old English poetry, the way it operates in this passage is striking. In all but four of the kennings, the sun is contextualized as a token of heaven, something owned or controlled by God. Consider the following: “Godes condelle” (“God’s candle,” 91), “torht tacen Godes” (“bright token of God,” 96), “swegles leoma” (“heaven’s lamp,” 104). And then consider that this passage corresponds to the most predominantly pagan portion of the Carmen, where the phoenix pays vigorous homage to the sun-god, Phoebus. Viewed in this context, the poet’s obsessive kenning seems compelled by much more than poetic inspiration. Rather, the kenning deliberately reinscribes the sun as a Christian symbol. This reinscription has two effects. First, it sets up the exegesis that follows: Christianizing the sun allows for an easy sun/son pun that converts the bird from pagan sun worshipper to faithful Christian. The author is certainly aware of this handy pun, as indicated in the following lines from his exegesis:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ðonne soðfæstum} & \quad \text{sawllum scineð} \\
\text{heah ofer hrofas} & \quad \text{hælende Crist.} \\
\text{Him fol giaó} & \quad \text{fugias scyne,} \\
\text{beorhte gebredade} & \quad \text{blissum hremige} \\
\text{in þam gladan ham} & \quad \text{gæstas gecorene} \\
\text{ece to caldre.} & 
\end{align*}
\]

Then the redeeming Christ, high above its roofs, will shine upon souls steadfast in truth. Him they will follow, these beautiful birds, radiantly regenerate, blissfully jubilant, spirits elect, into that happy home everlasting to eternity (589-94, translation from Bradley).
But these lines also serve another purpose, for the reinscription of the sun conveniently removes the pagan implications of these lines. Considering the sun’s possible links to both paganism and the female goddess, Isis, the author’s struggle to translate the sun into a symbol of Christianity align quite nicely with his overall purpose: to translate the myth of the phoenix from a pagan story with quite clearly feminine ties into a symbol of Christian redemption that could speak directly to the men who were busily trying to strengthen the Church’s power in Anglo-Saxon England.

But how effective is this translation? I have argued throughout this section that the Old English author changes the Carmen and the mythology of the phoenix legend to suit Germanic and Christian purposes. In the same way that the early church fathers wrote gender conversion into the narrative accounts of the lives of female saints, the Old English author makes the phoenix male. But reading The Phoenix as a translation rather than a mere adaptation provides a unique perspective on the Old English poet’s modifications to the Carmen—his efforts to masculinize the phoenix can be viewed as attempts to proclaim his own masculinity and dominance over the Latin narrative that has fallen into his hands. According to modern translation theory, male translators place themselves in a tenuous subject position. Because paradigms of translation have traditionally associated originality and creativity with paternity and authority, generations of male translators have felt compelled to assert their paternity over and enforce the fidelity of the female text. So powerful has this compulsion been that current translation theory figures translation as the literary equivalent of colonization and, to interpret George Steiner’s four steps of translation, as a form of date rape. Let’s take another look at Steiner’s steps. First, the translator initiates a relationship with the text by demonstrating his commitment to “take a gamble on it.” During the most aggressive stage of translation, appropriative penetration, the “rape” occurs as the translator enters the text and forcefully claims it as his own.
During naturalization, the imprisoned text is converted into the translator’s own language and tradition. And finally, during reciprocity, the author attempts to restore balance to the translation to make amends for his aggressive acts against the text.

But despite these acts of aggression, or perhaps because of them, many feminist translation theorists posit that the complex gender politics involved in translation make it risky for the male translator. Lori Chamberlain argues that because translations can so effectively masquerade as originals, the act of translation calls into question the male role in reproduction—if a man can’t “father” a text, how can he claim to father anything else? Chamberlain concludes, “The metaphors of translation reveal both an anxiety about the myths of paternity (or authorship of authority) and a profound ambivalence about the role of maternity” (63). I will conclude this paper by showing that, in the Old English poem, the author’s anxiety and ambivalence finally signals a larger problem, a category crisis that reveals the instability of the Christian construction of gender difference. For the Old English phoenix/Phoenix is finally not as comfortably gendered as its author constructs it to be.

IV

The instability of the Phoenix is revealed in the closing lines of the poem, where Latin half-lines follow Old English half-lines, creating what Martin Irvine has called “hybrid textuality” (188).

Hafað us alyfed  lucis auctor
þæt we motun her  merueri,
goddædum begietan  gaudia in celo,
þær we motum  maxima regna
secan ond gesittan,  sedibus altis
lifgan in lisse  lucis et pacis,
agan eardinga  alma letitie,
brucan blæddaga,  blandem et mittem
geseon sigora Frean  sine fine
ond Him lof singan  laude perenne
eadge mid englum.  Alleluia.

The Author of light has granted us that here we may merit and gain by good deeds
joys in heaven. There we may seek out realms most broad and sit upon lofty
thrones, live in the graces of light and of peace, obtain abodes of genial delight,
enjoy days of prosperity, look upon the Lord of victories, gentle and mild, without
cease, and sing him praises in perpetual laud, blessed, amid the angels. Alleluia
(667-677).

Irvine reads these lines as a melding of cultures, as the author’s recognition that Anglo-
Saxon readers speak two languages that can inform each other. And if we recall Steiner’s
four steps of translation, these lines exemplify the reciprocity step. In these lines, the Old
English author gestures to his source, and tries to restore balance through the versatility of
the Old English poetic line. Because it is the Old English poetic line that “allows” the Latin
and dictates the form of the poem, the poet also appears to retain control over his source
and his translation. Unfortunately, as Foucault has taught us, power is never that simple:
“discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes
it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). In asserting his power over
the text, the Old English poet simultaneously reveals the constructedness of his position—
giving the source a voice points out that the poet is only a translator, not an author.
Despite his efforts to create a new version of the phoenix legend in the Old English poem,
the author leaves us with a translation, one text that has been made into another in the same way that the Latin is made into Anglo-Saxon verses in the final lines of the poem.

The tension created between the *Phoenix* and its author is compounded when we consider the role the final lines play within the poem itself. The poet intends to leave his readers with a call to action that spells out the rewards available to those who choose to follow the “lucis auctor” (“author of light,” 667). Certainly Latin is typically the appropriate tongue for such homiletic statements, but for the Old English author, Latin has stood for something entirely different—in the *Carmen*, Latin was used to laud Roman gods and the power of the reproductive female. It seems ironic that just as the author offers his audience a chance to be “reborn” in Christ, he lapses into the language of his source, a source that has a less restrictive and more ambiguous take on reproduction and gender roles. The reappearance of the Latin (and all that it signifies in terms of this particular act of translation) exposes a second story, a second identity, a second sex, underneath the heroic, Christian language used to rewrite the Old English version of the phoenix legend. One could almost say that the text and the heroized phoenix figure itself are cross-dressed—even as the Old English poet finishes “dressing” his female-turned-male text, accessorizing it with a description of the afterlife that will certainly appeal to his male, non-Christian audience, *The Phoenix* reveals its “true” identity as the Latin surfaces and resurfaces in each poetic line.

For most medievalists, cross-dressing has been read as a protective strategy. Women cross-dressed to protect themselves from physical harm (many religious women found they could better perform their duties and journey on pilgrimages disguised as men) or from public disgrace (women who wished to serve God in a greater capacity, typically reserved for males, might dress as men in order to achieve their goals). But my theorization of the term is an attempt to link it closer to the “becoming male” trope found
in the works of male Christian authors. For men, cross-dressing was not viewed as a practical solution, but read and written as a gender transformation. Religious women abandoned their femininity when they martyred themselves for Christ or chose the aesthetic lifestyle practiced by most of the early (male) saints. For male Christian authors, then, masculine and Christian become inexorably linked.

Simultaneously, however, the very notion that women could “become male” undercuts the church’s insistence on gender difference and gender hierarchy. As Castelli points out, the categories of male and female are not as well defined as the church claims (33). The irony of the Old English author’s lapse into Latin and the exposure of the cross-dressed nature of his text would not surprise Marjorie Garber, who has recently theorized transvestitism and cross-dressing in a mammoth, but entertaining, book. For Garber,

The apparently spontaneous or unexpected or supplementary presence of a transvestite figure in a text (whether fiction or history, verbal or visual, imagistic or “real”) that does not seem, thematically, to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender indicates a category crisis elsewhere, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity and displaces the resulting discomfort onto figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin. (17, her italics)

Transvestite figures appear when categories collapse, when the pressure to explain identities and differences into tidy, all-encompassing definitions fails. And Garber also notes that the common way to avoid a “close encounter with the transvestite,” and a confrontation with the instability of identity is to read “through” the figure. The tendency has been to “subsume [the transvestite] within one of the two traditional genders, to elide and erase—or to appropriate the transvestite for particular political or cultural aims” (9,
her italics). Certainly this has been the case with the phoenix figure presented in the
_Carmen_ and _The Phoenix_; critics have failed to consider the issue of the bird’s gender
change at all. But a “close encounter” with the phoenix figure in the Old English poem
helps us see how the church’s efforts to categorize and contain gender difference fail. One
might almost say that the phoenix, both the figure and the poem that it inhabits, are cross-
dressed, made male in order to dissociate the legend from its connections to a text that
lauds a lack of gender differentiation.

The phoenix figure reveals its cross-dressed, destabilized identity in the “feminized”
position inhabited by the heroic, masculine bird throughout _The Phoenix_. In the Old
English poem, the phoenix is objectified both by the author and by the onlookers written
into the legend. As I pointed out before, the introductions to the phoenix differ strikingly
between the _Carmen_ and _The Phoenix_. Lactantius describes the bird as “unica,” “alone of
its kind,” unique, or peerless (31, and he lauds the bird for its difference, for the singularity
of its lifestyle. In the Old English poem, however, the author immediately fixates on the
bird’s body—we learn that the bird is fair, strong-winged, and brave. While these words
help to “dress” the text and the phoenix figure in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of _comitanus_,
they simultaneously focus attention upon the bird’s body. Ensuing epithets refer again and
again to the bird’s wings, feathers, limbs and coloring; in contrast, the bird in the Latin
poem is not described at all until the detailed description that begins at line 123. Even the
worm from which the phoenix develops in the Old English poem is described as “wundrum
fæger” (“wondrously fair,” 232). Such attention to physical details seems more appropriate
to the attention typically lavished on the female body, as when Perpetua emerges into the
arena, naked, for her execution. The phoenix’s body, like Perpetua’s, may have other
meanings attached to it, but it is still a spectacle with no subjectivity of its own. As
Margaret Miles would say, “Although, in the bonding of her body to religious subjectivity,
Perpetua has ‘become male,’ her body remains a spectacle to the observer. . . . Perpetua’s body could represent ‘male’ heroism, commitment, and courage, even while it remained an object for the male gaze” (61).

The phoenix in the Old English poem is further objectified during the final “retinue” scene, where it becomes a passive figure and, in fact, a mere representation for the good works done by God. Unlike the crowds in the *Carmen*, who gather to marvel at the “unica” bird and escort her home, the crowds in the Old English poem gather

\[
\text{folca } \text{þryþum} \\
\text{þær hi sceawiaþ} \quad \text{Scyppendes giefe} \\
\text{fægre on þam fugle,} \quad \text{swa him æt fruman sette} \\
\text{sigora Soðcyning} \quad \text{sellicran gecynd,} \\
\text{frætwe fægran} \quad \text{ofer fugla cynn.}
\]

in troops of people where they gaze upon the Creator’s beauteous gifts in the bird, as in the beginning the true King of victories ordained for him a rarer nature and beauteous treasures over the family of fowl (326-330)

The people come not to see the bird, but to see the works of God represented in the bird. The bird’s body becomes the site/sight of God, so much so that it is hard to tell from the language alone whether the people are praising the phoenix or God (recall my earlier analysis of this passage, where I noted that the epithets applied to the bird take on religious connotations as this scene progresses). As the adoring crowd encircles the phoenix, the phoenix also becomes an object not just of its affection, but of the action in the poem. During the 15 lines of this sequence (335-350), the phoenix is referred to 11 times. All but three of these references are in the accusative case—figuratively and grammatically, the phoenix becomes the object of the gaze, a representation that collects
meanings. This latter statement resonates when we consider that the Old English poet begins his exegesis only 40 lines later. The Old English poet may dress the phoenix in heroic, masculine epithets and situations, but his imagistic treatment of the figure reveals the bird’s duality. And finally, perhaps the most glaring evidence of the bird’s destabilized gender identity is its ability to reproduce. While the Old English author and the Christian church may attempt to marginalize the female role in reproduction, the act of giving birth still serves as the fundamental signifier of the feminine. Just as the legendary Pope Joan revealed her gender by giving birth during a papal procession, the heroic, saintly phoenix calls its masculinity into question by giving birth. Or, viewed another way, the phoenix reveals the trouble with gender categories. Is our cross-dressed phoenix merely performing the “male,” while remaining comfortably “female”? Or has the phoenix truly become male? And if this is so, what happens to the category “male” when it gives birth?

In the Old English poem, the transvestite phoenix serves as the site for these questions and many others about the comfort of gendered categories. Like the transvestite figures discussed by Garber, the Old English phoenix “offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of “female” and “male,” whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (10). Even as the Old English author attempts to explain away the “happy ambiguity” offered in the Carmen, to create a stable “male” to thwart, not just the feminine, but the gender potentiality of the Latin version of the phoenix legend, his figure disrupts the binary by performing aspects of both genders. The presence of this figure reveals the problems with the Christian church’s construction of gendered categories and hierarchies. On the one hand, the church has used gender as a way to allocate power and maintain societal dominance for nearly two millennia. On the other hand, the church has also allowed for the deconstruction of these
categories by offering women the chance to step from one gender role to another, to
perform male in order to attain salvation. As the church prepares to enter the third
millennia of its influence, many of the questions evident in the Old English phoenix figure
continue to plague the church. Can Catholicism continue to preach patriarchal dominance
in a world where gender equity has become dogma? If women are at last offered the
chance to serve as priests, what will this do to the church’s construction of gender
difference? Issues of gender, sexuality, and identity are not as easy to explain as humanity
would like them to be: as Laqueur writes, “The flesh, like the repressed, will not long
allow itself to remain in silence. The fact that we become human in culture... does not
give us license to ignore the body: ‘It is obvious that sex is something more than what
society designates, or what naming makes it’” (13).

NOTES

1 Bugge’s article, which posits a “monastic author” whose phoenix embodies the rigors of
chaste monastic life, represents one of the more interesting recent studies on the poem.
Another article concerned with reinterpreting the images in The Phoenix is Yun Lee Too’s
examination of its “sensuousness,” which she links to Augustine’s assertion that the senses
bring one closer to God. Structuralist studies predominate, however. Andrew Patenall
applies John Leyerle’s theory of interlace to the poem, likening the phoenix to a piece of
jewelry or a figure in stained glass window. Brian A. Shaw examines the poem’s scribal
divisions to show how they relate to and illuminate the process of translation. The
divisions of the poem also interest Robert D. Stevick, though his article exploring The
Phoenix’s design requires both a calculator and the patience to tolerate memories of high
school geometry. In the most unenigmatic studies of all, David Yerkes discusses the origin
of the Old English and Old Norse prose versions of the legend, while Thomas D. Hill
examines typological allusion in the altered itinerary of the Old English bird. I have
omitted from this discussion the only “engimatic” criticism on the poem—an article by
Carol Falvo Heffernan and her ensuing book, both of which read the Old English poem
and its source as “gendered” poems. I will focus heavily on Heffernan’s interpretation of
*The Phoenix* later in this paper.

2Bugge noted the obsession (p. 337). Cross commented on the absence of sun cult
imagery (p. 131).

3The terminology “becoming male” has been borrowed from patristic authors, most
notably St. Jerome’s commentary on the discussion of marriage in Ephesians. To Jerome,
as long as women engage in childbirth and childrearing, they are as different from men as
body is from soul. Yet he sees a way out: “Sin autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam
saeculo, mulier esse cessabit, et dicatur vir” (“But if she wishes to serve Christ more than
the world, she will cease to be a woman and *will be called man*”). Saint Perpetua, who
dreams that she takes on a male body just before her public execution, is the quissessential
example of this trope. While Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out that this type of
gender conversion was primarily a component of male religiosity, modern female
medievalists have taken up the terminology in their historical and literary analyses in order
to ascertain whether “becoming male” was for women repudiation or redemption,
performance or prerequisite, transcendence or trap. My paper will enter this dialogue
below; for now, see Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, “Heroics;” Margaret Miles, *Carnal
Knowing*, especially Chap. 5; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*,
especially Chaps. 1 and 4; and Elizabeth Castelli, “I Will Make Mary Male.”
4Van den Broek’s comprehensive analysis of the legend traces its classical development, summarizing most of the major sources, such as Ovid, and examining specifics of the myth to determine when and ask why they came into vogue.

5The text and the translation of the Carmen are from Duff.

6N.F. Blake rejects earlier suggestions that Cynewulf himself wrote The Phoenix, instead arguing that any resemblance between this poem and the signed works of Cynewulf indicates merely a Cynewulfian influence (pp. 22-24).

7Gal. 3.27-28. The translation is my own. The Vulgate reads, “Quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis, Christum induistis. Non est Iudaeus neque Graecus, non est servus neque liber, non est masculus neque femina: omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu.”

8Many authors, particularly Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg and Suzanne Fonay Wemple, have investigated the impact that the Christian church had on the lives of early medieval women. Schulenberg notes that early sainted women exercised power and autonomy in the church, founding their own communities and educating themselves and their followers, often against family wishes (see “Female Sanctity,” p. 106-14). As Wemple states, “Christianity was a liberating force in the lives of women” (p. 190-91). See also Schulenberg, “Heroics;” James Brundage’s Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe, and Elizabeth A. Clark’s Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends.

9“Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin,” 2:49. The translation used here, with my italics added, can be found in Baer, p. 48.
10 As Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out, the “becoming male” trope was more a component of men’s religiosity than women’s. While certainly a large number of women donned male garb to enter male religious communities, most of them did so for protection, not because they wished to change their gender. Bynum notes that actual conversion tales, particularly gender conversions, appear more frequently in male salvation stories than female accounts. The appearance of the trope itself in the writings of the church fathers has been sufficiently explored by the authors listed in note 3 above.


12 The text is from Blake’s edition of The Phoenix. Translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. A similar pronoun problem occurs for the Carmen. Van den Broek cites several versions of the legend that gender the phoenix as female. The Carmen is not among them. Duff and Duff’s Latin text, however, refers to the bird with the feminine pronoun “sua.”

13 Aeschylus’s play, The Eumenides, provides the standard text defining the one sex model: “The woman is not the true parent of the child / Which is called hers. She is a nurse who tends the growth / Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male” (ll. 657-59). Until Galen’s “double-seed” theory of reproduction was accepted by the European medical community in the twelfth century, popular gynecological theories posited that male seed initiated the reproductive process. Women, who were viewed anatomically as imperfect men, played little or no role in reproduction according to these theories. Even those trained in medicine espoused the one-sex theory. Soranus, a second-century obstetrician, echoed the views of most philosophers and theologians when he likened reproduction to, “sowing
extraneous seed upon the land for the purpose of bringing forth fruit" *(Gynecology, 1:35).* Isidore translates the gynecological process to a social context in order to explain illegitimacy and inheritance: “For a child to have a father means that it is from one blood, that is from the same semen as the father” *(Etymologianum, 9.6.4).* The male possessed the generating seed; women were merely the incubators who bore it. As Hildegard of Bingen wrote in the eleventh century, “[Woman] is a weak and frail vessel for man” (p. 83). Laqueur draws the following conclusions, “Being male and being a father, having what it takes to produce the more powerful seed, is the ascendancy of mind over the senses, of order over disorder, legitimacy over illegitimacy” (p. 58).

Nancy Jay’s fascinating study examines how blood sacrifice operates in social systems based on patrilineal descent, where social order and continuity passes from father to son. She notes that much of the terminology associated with these rituals links it to reproduction, and that by participating in these rituals, patriarchal societies create an "eternal" social order that transcends the “life” given by women.

For an explanation of this social system and a rereading of the peaceweaver role within it, see Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature.*

The quoted passage is from Castelli, p. 32. Bynum notes that “women say less about gender. . . and place more emphasis on interior motivation and continuity of self. Men use more dichotomous images, are more concerned to define ‘the female’ as both positive and negative, and speak more often of reversal and conversion” (p. 156).

For more discussion on the nature of Jerome’s friendships with women, see Elizabeth A. Clark, pp. 35-59. Evidence for women’s untenable position can be found in Chrysostom’s
writings, particularly his homilies on Genesis 1-3. Chrysostom inferred from biblical
evidence that women's supposed subordination to men was a postlapsarian consequence,
brought upon women as a penalty for misdeeds. At creation, he argued, man and woman
lived in a natural state of equality. But in his discussion of Colossians 1 and Corinthians 3,
however, Chrysostom considers male domination "natural," or at least holds that certain
roles came more naturally for men than women. Clark concludes that Chrysostom's belief
in this was so strong that "anything that mitigated the power of men over women,
particularly in marriage, was viewed as rebellion against nature and nature's God." See
Clark, pp. 4-6.

16 The restrictions placed upon women during the Carolingian period and the effect that
these reforms had on women's religiosity have been examined in detail by Wemple and
Schulenberg. In Carnal Knowing, Margaret Miles also assesses the effect that religious
isolation had on women's ability to construct a theological position separate from male
religiosity (p. 84).

17 The thirteenth century Ancrense Wisse is a fascinating example of the church's conscious
or unconscious dissociation of women from the standards of male religiosity. Elizabeth
Robertson compares the spiritual guide to its sources and finds that its author tailors his
text to his audience by making it more experiential and less abstract and historical. Her
analysis "suggests that male contemplatives in the Middle Ages were trained to see
themselves as part of an abstract hierarchy through which they progressed in stages to
God, whereas female contemplatives were expected to perceive that hierarchy only insofar
as it related to their everyday experience and their bodies" (p. 126).
Margaret Miles engages Bakhtin to show how the “potentiality” of women’s bodies (visible through reproduction and menstruation) may have threatened the closed, ordered system that the Church fathers were attempting to explain and create (p. 77).

At this moment, Heffernan’s words anticipate Nancy Partner’s unfortunate introduction to the April 1993 special issue of *Speculum* (now published as *Studying Medieval Women*), in which she deprives feminism of an independent stance and instead considers it a way of “restoring [medieval women’s] full humanity to medieval men. Far from radicalizing medieval studies, feminist scholarship is, in this respect, normalizing the discipline” (p. 2). Partner’s essay generated quite an energetic debate at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies; Carla Freccero, in particular, picked up on Partner’s description of the one-sex model as “corpselike” to liken feminism’s effect on medieval studies to raising the undead. Such extreme readings are certainly amusing, but perhaps not entirely necessary. The sad fact is that while Partner’s humanistic vision may seem a logical goal, feminist readings that aspire merely to make traditional readings whole ultimately silence themselves, as Heffernan so effectively does.

Leviticus 15.23. The Vulgate reads, “Omne vas super quo illa sederit, quisquis attigerit, lavabit vestimenta sua, et ipse lotus aqua polutus erit usque ad vesperum.”

From the testimony of Jacqueline Felicie de Almania in 1322, quoted in Beryl Rowland’s *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health*, p. 10.

Whether or not women should be allowed to attend church after pregnancy became quite a controversy during the early growth of the Church. The Penitentials were against it, decreeing that women could return to Mass only after a purification period similar to that
laid out in Leviticus. Pope Gregory I tried to relax these restrictions somewhat. Chapter 27 of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* contains a series of “replies” to Augustine of Canterbury; answer 8 states that if a mother “enters the church the very hour that she is delivered, to return thanks, she is not guilty of sin,” and furthermore that “the woman... must not be forbidden to come into the church whilst she has her monthly courses; because the superfluity of nature cannot be imputed to her as a crime.” But nevertheless, by the thirteenth century, the church had instituted a blessing for the “churching” of women, which women who had just given birth were expected to undergo before returning to worship. The text of the blessing can be found in Emilie Ami’s sourcebook of the lives of medieval women.

Hippocrates, who served as the primary gynecological authority for early medieval philosophers until well into the fifteenth century, has been credited as the creative genius behind this particular practice. Hippocrates asserted that the womb was directly connected to other bodily systems, as one of his sterility tests indicates: “If a woman does not conceive and you wish to know if she will conceive, cover her round with wraps and burn perfumes underneath. If the smell seems to pass through the body to the mouth and nostrils, be assured that the women is not barren through her own fault” (*Aphorisms*, 5:59). Even though Soranus objected to such procedures in his *Gynecology*, fumigations remained popular through the eighteenth century.

*Divinæ institutiones*, 1:15. The Latin reads, “... singuli populi gentis aut urbis suae conditores, seu viri fortitudine insignes erant seu femina castitate mirabiles, summa veneratione coluerunt ut Aegyptus Isidem...” For more information on the spread of Isis worship through the Roman Empire, see Benko, pp. 43-49 and Kee, pp. 128-34.
The translation can be found in Benko, p. 42-43. Augustine himself also reflects upon the absence of this pagan goddess in his commentary on psalm 98, writing in verse 14, “What were the kingdoms of this earth? The kingdoms of idols, the kingdoms of daemons are broken. . . How great was the power of Caelestis which was in Carthage! Where now is the kingdom of Caelestis?” (Quae erant regna terrae? Regna idolorum, regna daemoniorum fracta sunt. . . Regnum Cælestis quale erat Carthagini! Ubi nunc est regnum Cælestis?”)

The translation of sateiles as acolyte struck me as highly ironic, considering that this poem is traditionally read in a Christian context, a context in which women and girls have been prevented from serving at the altar. On April 15, 1994, the Catholic church announced that girls could, at last, serve as acolytes along with boys. See, as well, my discussion of antistes below.

An Egyptian manuscript dated between 1350-1200 BCE reveals that Ré was not simply outdated, but perhaps viewed as an incompetent god. In this story, Isis decides to ascertain Re’s secret name, and accomplishes her mission by fashioning a snake from the senile Ré’s own drool. When the snake bites Ré, Isis offers to cure him, provided that he reveal his secret name to her. She cures him, and the story concludes by lauding “Isis the Great, the Mistress of the Gods, who knows Re (by) his own name.” The story is presented in Kee, pp. 108-109.

The primary elements of the myth were summarized in Plutarch’s second century De Iside et Osiride. The legend states that Osiris’s brother, in an attempt to seize power, drowned Osiris in a box. When the body was inconveniently discovered, Seth chopped Osiris’s body into fourteen pieces, which he scattered throughout Egypt. Isis, with the
help of Anubis and the sacred birds, recovered all but his penis. She resurrected him nonetheless, and Osiris served as the god of the underworld, escorting the dead to new life (12-19). For information on the evolution of the Osiric triad, see Benko, pp. 44-50 and Kee, pp. 105-45. One should also note that, like Isis, the *benu* was associated with the Nile, serving as an ideogram for “flood” in Egyptian festivals.

31 *Metamorphoses*, verse 2.

32 The aretalogies are analyzed in detail by Heyob, pp. 47-52. See her book for more information on how the cult of Isis was received by Greek and Roman women.

33 Some exceptions are listed in Duff, p. 653, n. b.

34 It is important to note that while women did participate in the cult of Isis, they did not form a majority of the worshippers as some historians have contended. Such assumptions are common, though, as Bynum notes, “The gender of a deity or leaders does not dictate participation [by people of that gender]” (p. 55). Heyob notes that less than 20 percent of Isaac inscriptions refer to women (p. 81), but concludes that perhaps the fact the women participated in the cult at all is what makes the cult remarkable.

35 *Metamorphoses*, 7:10. For further discussion of the role of water in the Isis cult, see Benko, pp. 49-51.

36 Benko, in particular, notes that the Isis cult’s practices may have influenced Christian baptism (p. 48). That the water flowing from the *Carmen’s* fountain is described with the word *gurgite*, however, suggests its stronger link to the annual flooding of the Nile.
The resemblance between these two passages may have an even stronger connection if one considers closely the number of times that the phoenix immerses itself in the fountain. Duff translates the phrase “Ter quater” as “thrice and again,” and the phrase is commonly translated as “again and again” in classical texts. But “ter” and “quater” alone are the numbers “three” and “four,” respectively, which suggests the number seven. Lactantius may merely be using classical phrasing, but considering the repetition of the phrase and the emphasis upon the number seven in the Apuleius material, it is tempting to read more into this passage.

Quoted in Chamberlain, pp. 61-62. I am grateful to Robert Stanton for directing me to this reference.

Quoted in Cross, p. 137.

The poet seems particularly obsessed with the bird’s physical strength, a preoccupation that actually seems at odds with the poem, for the bird does very little flying during this opening sequence. Nevertheless, of the eleven epithets applied to the bird in its 40 line introduction, four refer specifically to the bird’s flying ability (besides 85, see 99, 100, and 123). The remaining epithets are “æpela” (“noble,” 104), “tireadga” (“glorious,” 106), and “haswa fugel beorht” (“shining gray bird,” 121-22).

The passage from Bakhtin is quoted in Miles, pp. 153.

The three references that occur in the nominative occur at ironic moments. At each occurrence, the nominative reference stresses the bird’s isolation and desire to escape from the adoring throngs. For example, the first reference depicts a trapped, isolated phoenix.
particularly considering the militaristic terminology applied to the crowd: "Fenix biþ on middum / þreatum biþrungen" ("The phoenix is in the middle, thronged about by troops," 340-41, my emphasis). The next two nominative references depict the bird escaping from the crowd:

Ωϕξετ se anhoga
oðfleogeð féþrum snell þæt him gefyłgan ne mæg
drymendra gedryht, þonne duguða wyn
of þisse eorþan tyrf eþel seceð.

Until the recluse flies away upon swift wings, so that the adoring crowds cannot keep up with him, then the delight of the people leaves the earth to seek his native land (346-48).

An anonymous reader of a shorter version of this paper submitted to Signs pointed out yet another way that the phoenix may be feminized during this passage. The language used during this passage bears some resemblance to the language found when Judith speaks triumphantly to the people after beheading Holofernes (159-70). The possibility that the phoenix takes on qualities of the female warrior during this passage is intriguing. Unfortunately, the similarities between these passages were not close enough for me to draw any conclusions. I invite other readers to explore this potentiality.

The myth of Pope Joan can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio’s Concerning Famous Women.

I find it impossible to ask this latter question without extending it to a pop culture metaphor. In 1994, the movie Junior depicted not just a pregnant man, but a pregnant
Arnold Schwartzenegger. Some of the questions raised by this movie seem quite similar to those raised by the phoenix figure. Why, in both these cases, is exaggerated masculinity impregnated? *Junior* and *The Phoenix* gives us a pregnant Terminator and Beowulf, respectively. It would be interesting to investigate other figures of male pregnancy in literature and pop culture to determine how this current biological impossibility has been represented.
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