
Original Article

Nonbeenary gender: Bees and grammar in monastic culture circa 800–1070

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Abstract At the interface of grammar and nature, bees served as a figure of transgender identification for monks in England, France, and Germany circa 800–1070. Monks recognised bees as essential nonhuman participants in monastic life. Bees were associated with chastity, and communal life, but also with the arts of grammar and poetry. They were also known for their divergence from human sexual difference. Monastic writers used bees to conceptualise their own status in the sexual economy of their society, by experimenting with the grammatical genders used to refer to bees, identifying bees with monks, and rewriting the genders of monks in the process. This process of nonbeenary identification unfolds in Old English and Latin bee charms, and in the works of monastic writers including Rainerus of Blandin, Bern of Reichenau, and Wulfstan of Winchester.

Résumé À l'interface de la grammaire et de la nature, les abeilles servaient comme figures d'identification transgenre pour les moines en Angleterre, en France, et en Allemagne vers 800–1070. Les moines reconnaissaient en les abeilles des participantes non-humaines essentielles à la vie monastique. On associait les abeilles à la chasteté et à la vie en communauté, mais aussi aux arts de la grammaire et de la poésie. On tenait également les abeilles pour divergentes des humains en termes de différence sexuelle. Les écrivains monastiques utilisaient les abeilles pour conceptualiser leur propre statut dans l'économie sexuelle de leur société, en expérimentant avec les genres grammaticaux utilisés pour se référer aux abeilles, en identifiant les abeilles aux moines, et ce faisant, en réécrivant les genres des moines. Ce processus d'identification *nonbeenary* se déroule dans les sorts pour abeilles en vieil anglais et en latin, ainsi que dans

l'œuvre d'écrivains monastiques tels que Rainerus de Blandin, Bern de Reich-
enau, et Wulfstan de Winchester.

Keywords: Nonbinary; Nonhuman; Monks; Bees; Grammar

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At the interface of grammar and nature, bees served as a figure of transgender, transspecies identification for monks in England, France, and Germany circa 800–1070. Monks recognised bees as essential nonhuman participants in monastic life. Models of bee reproduction in circulation in this period were varied and contradictory, but they converged on the notion that bees did not conform to strict sexual dimorphism. This article argues that, as sexually divergent figures that exemplified chastity and selflessness, bees allowed monks to conceptualise their own position in their society and its sexual economy. Monks perceived that a binary separating life into male and female governed the secular world, and also understood that this binary failed to describe them. Through their encounters with and their writing about bees, these monks explored the possibility that their embodied social position might exceed this binary division.

My argument builds on the large body of scholarship that analyses the medieval clergy's divergence from the gender binary, a divergence that is sometimes conceptualised as a 'clerical third gender' (Murray 2008, 35; McDaniel 2018; Mitchell 2003, 133–36; Swanson 1999; Cullum 1999).¹ I do so by surveying a diverse spectrum of identifications through which monks wrote about and performed their divergence from the male/female binary. Rather than mapping onto the modern phenomenon of nonbinary identity, these identifications showcase monastic writers' creative and perhaps surprising capacity to understand themselves not only beyond the male/female binary but also beyond the borders of the human.

Nonbeenary gender problematises some of the 'key axioms' Tess Wingard (2023, 943) helpfully describes as informing the field, which rely on notions of 'gender identity' and 'gender assigned at birth' (2023, 945) that risk extending into the Middle Ages normative contemporary notions of an internally consistent 'core gender identity' free from social determination. Leah DeVun, among others, has already shown the immense diversity of medieval concepts of sex/gender, which was imagined in some sources as fundamentally mutable (2021, 16–39, 163–200), as well as through comparison, opposition, and identification

1 The term *third gender* is not intended to indicate a restrictive, transparent, essential category that would merely add another option to the prescriptive schema of the gender binary.



with nonhuman animals (2021, 70–101). Investigations into the diversity of medieval lives and ideas ought to keep contemporary concepts such as ‘gender’ under pressure, to avoid tacitly reinforcing the hard borders contemporary ideology imposes between individuals and society, self and environment, human and animal. Nonbeenary gender corroborates DeVun’s argument that, in the Middle Ages, ‘bodies that did not fit a sexual binary became a concentrated site of meaning where arguments about sex, gender, sexuality, animality, religiosity, and the nature of life on earth all played out’ (2021, 5).

This article unfolds in four parts: I begin with the atypical example of a charm, ‘Columcille’s Circle,’ that, rather than embracing the divergence of bees’ genders, masculinises bees instead. ‘Columcille’s Circle’ shows that monks who sought to masculinise bees recognised the grammatically marked gender of bees to be highly significant, notably within the context of bees’ interactions with monks. By contrast, the second section analyses two other bee charms that emphasise the femininity of bees. These charms illustrate the emotionally fraught relation between bees and monks that unfolded in the day-to-day practice of apiculture. The third section introduces a key example of the monk-bee trope—the idea that, in their learning, community, and chastity, monks are like bees. This trope, I argue, serves to explore the possible divergences that transspecies identification makes possible, and the third section surveys the key sources for the sexual divergence of bees in ancient and medieval natural history, theology, and liturgy. The fourth section analyses instances of the monk-bee trope across monastic hagiographical writing. By identifying themselves with bees, monks used conceptual tools from natural history and linguistic and intellectual tools from the art of grammar to explore the possibility that they may exist outside binary boundaries.

Columcille’s Circle

Before discussing examples that showcase the range and flexibility of nonbeenary genders, I will begin with a source that seeks to flatten the genders of bees, because it provides a way into the practicalities of medieval monastic beekeeping, and because it will show that bees’ genders were malleable and subject to grammatical modification for monks circa 800–1070. ‘Columcille’s Circle’ is a well-known charm in Old English and Latin, copied in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius E.xviii, an eleventh-century manuscript from Winchester (Ker 1957, 301; Wormald 1988, 155; Bishop and Gasquet 1908, 19; Rosier 1962, xvi). I use the term *charm* out of convenience and to remain consistent with scholarly conventions, not because I believe this ritual belongs to a sphere of pagan

magic separate from Christian liturgical practices. Ciaran Arthur convincingly argues that ‘charms’ in pre-conquest England were in fact ‘mainstream Christian texts’ (2018). Like him, I do not see these rituals as a clandestine deviation from monastic life, but as a continuation of liturgical practices.

Apiculture was an essential feature of monastic life in medieval Western Europe, both as a source of honey and because beeswax was the only acceptable material for candles used in a devotional context (Fife 1964). Monasteries were buzzing with bees, human and otherwise. Yet monastic apiculture, at least from the monks’ point of view, was not always a peaceful, harmonious contribution to the monastic ecosystem. Monks made dome-shaped beehives called *skeps* out of coiled straw (or possibly wicker) for the bees to colonise (Crane 1999, 251–52; Osborn 2005, 9–11). One particularly tense activity was the hive’s transfer from one skep to another, which had to occur ‘at regular intervals both to ensure the bee colony’s growth and to allow the beekeeper to harvest honey and wax from the hive’ (Rust 1999, 361–62). As Martha Dana Rust highlights, ‘[d]uring the colony’s swarm . . . a beekeeper had little control over where the bees would settle, and the colony was also vulnerable to being stolen’—this is probably the origin for the Western European tradition of bee swarm charms (1999, 362). While, as I will discuss, the bee appears in hagiographical and liturgical sources as a model of communal order, during the swarm, bees appear alien, volatile, and vulnerable. The process of swarming elicited complicated, contradictory feelings in the monk-beekeeper, and these can be observed in bee charms themselves.

Rust’s study of ‘Columcille’s Circle’ places this charm firmly in the monastic context at Winchester, and the notion of monks’ identification with bees is central to her analysis. The charm gives Old English instructions for the performance of a ritual which involves the writing of a Latin text. The instructions are: ‘Write this circle with the point of your knife on a malmstone [a piece of soft, chalky rock], and drive a stake into the ground in the center of your apiary, and put the stone on top of the stake so that it is completely under the earth but for the writing’ (trans. from Old English in Rust 1999, 359). A diagram is included showing how to draw the figure on the malmstone, and where to write the following text:

contra
apes ut
salvi sint
& incorda
eorum. S ã h. (London, BL, MS Cotton Vitellius E.xviii, fol. 15v)

[Against bees and in their hearts so that they may be safe. S ã h.]²

2 All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.



Rust shows that ‘S ā h’ is probably an abbreviation of ‘scribam hanc’ (I will write this), and this gloss benefits from her analysis of the charm’s exemplification of *grammatica* and its importance in monastic life. ‘Columcille’s Circle’ thus provides an example of what Katherine Storm Hindley (2023) calls ‘textual magic,’ the use of charms whose efficaciousness comes at least in part from their being written. ‘Columcille’s Circle’ is thoroughly monastic. Its drawn element invokes the power of the cross, a commonplace iconographic element in Old English remedies which, according to Karen L. Jolly, showcases ‘the close relationship between liturgy and science, prayer and remedy’ (2006, 58). Along with its biblical allusions (Rust 1999, 375–76), this invocation of other Christian magical devices integrates ‘Columcille’s Circle’ in the series of liturgically inflected charms Arthur (2018, 142–45) identifies. ‘Columcille’s Circle’ also bears witness to ‘intricate and complex interactions between *grammatica*, written texts, and spiritual power’ (Rust 1999, 377),³ all the while drawing on the tradition of the monk-bee trope.

Rust identifies some examples of the monk-bee trope as sources for its implicit operation in ‘Columcille’s Circle.’ She quotes Bede’s claim that the name *Columcille* comes from the combination of Saint Columba’s name with the word *cella* (Bede 2005, 3.5.9.2), meaning both ‘a monk’s cell’ and ‘a cell in a beehive.’ Thus, “‘Colum-*cella*’s Circle” may signify either a device to watch over bee cells or a device to guard monk cells’ (Rust 1999, 368). In my discussion of the monk-bee trope I will show pervasive links between bees and the arts of writing. Bees are strongly associated, in ninth-through eleventh-century monastic culture, with the work of reading, writing, and literary composition. Together with their nonbeenary genders, genders that deviate from the male/female binary while enabling bees to retain their status as symbols of chaste virtue, this strength of association between bees and grammar makes bees into privileged figures for the transformation of gender.

In this discussion of grammatical gender being transformed, and being used to represent concepts of sexual difference or social role, there is a risk that the word *gender* may slip between its grammatical sense and contemporary senses which refer to ‘gender identity.’ It is important to apply the term *gender* advisedly. I do not believe that the contemporary notion of gender—anchored as it is in modern psychological and sexological models which are themselves facets of the Western liberal subject—can be unproblematically applied to premodern sources. Instead, medieval texts illustrate and produce their own concept of gender, one that is anchored not in psychology, but in grammar. The sources for the present study test the extent to which grammatical gender can represent sexual categories. They anticipate the crystallisation of gender as a

3 Italics in quotations are always in the original.

4 This will be the topic of my forthcoming monograph, tentatively entitled *Transgender Grammar*.

grammatical metaphor that would take place in the twelfth century, and lead to a wide-ranging debate across literature, grammar, and philosophy, about the extent to which grammatical categories can usefully and reliably stand in for human differences.⁴ The monk-bee trope anticipates aspects of this reinvention, and this is made possible by what monks perceived to be bees' proximity to the grammatical and poetic arts. Gender in the Middle Ages is grammatical first and social, sexual, or psychological second. Hence the grammatical 'mistake' of 'Columcille's Circle,' wherein 'salvi' and 'eorum' are in the masculine, even though they ought to agree with 'apes,' a feminine noun. Rust proposes two different explanations for this 'mistake.' First, she cites passages from Virgil that were well-known thanks to their inclusion in grammatical manuals such as Priscian's ubiquitous *Institutiones grammaticae* (Instructions of grammar). The noun *apis* in Latin (which 'Columcille's Circle' uses in the inflected form 'apes') is grammatically feminine. In the passages from Virgil quoted in grammatical manuals, bees are compared to soldiers, while the femininity of *apis* is not made apparent. Rust thus argues that '[i]f the monk who recorded "Columcille's Circle" had read Virgil's *Georgics* or *Aeneid* or if he had encountered them in exemplary sentences extracted by grammarians, he may have easily concluded from the imagery of these works that the grammatical gender for "bee"—*apis*—is masculine' (1999, 367).

This explanation is plausible, but Rust offers another, which is of particular interest for my argument. She cites a few examples of the monk-bee trope, and then suggests that the masculine terms used with *apis* in this charm were an intentional departure from grammatical usage. In order to mark out and emphasise the correspondence between bees and monks, the scribe of 'Columcille's Circle' may have chosen to decline *apis* with masculine terms, to avoid friction between bees' femininity and monks' masculinity. This seems a particularly likely explanation in the context of the charm's reflexive invocation of the power of writing and *grammatica*. Grammar is the first liberal art, the foundation for a monastic education. It is through grammar that the apprentice monk first attains knowledge of the world sanctioned by institutions of faith and learning. And grammar is the site where gender is forged. But the forging of gender is not just an arbitrary rule that is imposed from above: gender can be malleable, especially in a literary context. Anthony Corbeill has analysed the shifting status of grammatical gender in Ancient Roman culture. He shows that 'Latin grammatical gender is not arbitrary' (2015, 1), and that grammarians in ancient Rome endowed certain venerated poets with the capacity to modify nouns' grammatical genders. Corbeill's analysis of grammarians' engagement with the poets reveals those grammarians' 'assumption that the desire and ability of the most highly respected poets to transform grammatical gender provides tangible evidence of the superior knowledge



that these poets possess of the relationship between language and the natural world' (2015, 41).

This notion that poetry offers a privileged site for the remoulding of grammatical gender came down to medieval monks through essential grammatical treatises, such as Priscian's *Institutiones*. At the end of his discussion of gender in the *Institutiones*, Priscian cautions that the ancient poets whose texts he cites occasionally modify the genders of nouns 'auctoritate' (by authority) (1855, 5.169), and he then gives a long list of examples. The relation of medieval writers to classical poetic *auctoritas* is a matter of debate, but it should suffice to say that any literary production in c. 800–1070 Western Europe, especially in Latin, involves some degree of self-conscious imitation and thus appropriation of *auctoritas*. That the scribe and performer of 'Columcille's Circle' should appropriate the poets' *auctoritas* for the remaking of gender is in line with Rust's analysis of the charm's 'wry, self-reflexive sense of humor . . . that figures the beekeeper as a New Testament lord of bees' hearts even as it presents itself as a law to be written in stone' (1999, 377). The conscious and authoritative transformation of *apis*'s gender adds yet another layer to this humorous aspect of the charm.

Monastic culture in this period places bees at the interface of grammar and nature, and at this interface, the textual magic of 'Columcille's Circle' involves the transgender modification of bees' written signifier to normalise the analogy between bees and monks. This masculinisation of bees in 'Columcille's Circle' reveals that grammatical gender was a meaningful way of categorising bodies and social roles for monks in this period. This transgender modification also reveals that grammatical gender was not received by monastic writers and beekeepers as an inviolable law, but rather as an instrument that could be reshaped, especially within a poetic and textual setting. With this in mind, I now turn to a series of sources that show that bees' masculinisation was in fact not the standard way of navigating the monk-bee analogy. Rather, the sources that follow explore the possibility of nonbeenary gender, a textual depiction of bee-monks as divergent from the strict binary of male and female. Bees come to represent that which is distinctive about monastic life: not only monks' chastity, but also their assiduous pursuit of grammatical and poetic knowledge. The link between bees and lettered learning helps to figure monk-bees as the forgers of gender itself, where gender is understood as a grammatical construct. With the example of 'Columcille's Circle,' we see a monk-beekeeper potentially utilising his control of grammar to change the genders of bees. What follows are examples of the (much more common) opposite gesture, wherein bees are used by monks to think through their own relation to femininity.

Ambivalent feelings, feminine genders: Two more bee charms

The relations between monks and bees in liturgical and hagiographic texts are anthropocentric by their very nature. The transspecies identification of monks with bees occurs, in those sources, as a way of thinking about monastic community and identity in terms of bees. Bees modify monks' self-image in those texts; they serve as a tool for understanding the monks' place in their society, as well as a model of chaste, scholarly virtue. Before I turn to those sources, I will discuss two more bee charms that, like 'Columcille's Circle,' document a practical relation between monks and bees which goes beyond that of literary-allegorical instrumentality. Unlike in 'Columcille's Circle,' bees' femininity is strongly emphasised in these two charms but, like 'Columcille's Circle,' these charms show monk-bee relations at their most tangibly fraught. Bees' femininity takes on a distinctive meaning in this ambivalent context.

One ninth-century charm opens with the line 'Adjuro te mater aviorum' (I entreat you, mother of the bees) (Fife 1964, 154). The use of the verb *adjurare* illustrates the monk-beekeeper's ambivalence towards the *mater aviorum* during the crucial moment of the swarm, because *adjurare* can mean 'to swear,' 'to entreat,' and 'to conjure (a demon or demoniac), exorcize' (Latham, Howlett, and Ashdowne 2013, s.v. 'adjurare'). The verb's polysemy expresses the multifaceted relation between the bees and the monk-beekeeper during the swarm. The monk is in a subaltern relation to the bees because it is up to the bees whether they choose to settle in his skep. He is also in a dominant relation to them, because he extracts the fruits of their labour. And, as I will go on to discuss, the relation between the monks and the bees can be one of identification, as monks see in bees a natural exemplar for their own communal, chaste, nonbeenary way of life.

While this ninth-century Latin charm takes the form of an oath, a plea, or an order, there is another well-known bee charm from this period that expresses similarly conflicted modes of relating to bees through both speech and performative acts. This is the text beginning 'Wið ymbe,' often called 'the Old English bee charm.'

Wið ymbe nim eorþan, oferweorþ mid þinre swiþran handa under
þinum swiþran fet, and cwet:

'Fo ic under fot, funde ic hit.
Hwæt, eorðe mæg wið ealra wihta gehwilce
and wið andan and wið æminde
and wið þa micelan mannes tungan.'

And wið ðon forweorþ ofer greot þonne hi swirman, and cweð:



‘Sitte ge, sigewif, sigað to eorþan!
 Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan.
 Beo ge swa gemindige mines godes,
 swa bið manna gehwilc metes and eþeles.’ (Bjork 2014)

[In case of a swarm, take some earth, throw it with your right hand
 under your right foot and say:

‘I catch it under foot; I have found it. Listen! Earth has power against
 all kinds of beings and against malice and against jealousy and
 against the great tongue of man.’

And to counter them, throw dust over them when they swarm and
 say:

‘Alight, victory-women, settle to earth! Never fly wild to the woods.
 Be as mindful of my good as every person is of food and home.’]

Like the ‘Adjuro te mater aviorum’ charm, this script for a ritual witnesses a deep ambivalence towards swarming bees, so much so that there is disagreement among scholars as to whether the opening word *wið* should be understood as ‘in case of,’ ‘for,’ or ‘against’ (Rust 1999, 362; Storms 1948, 133). Above, I quoted Rust’s claim that these incantations are addressed to swarms which, while risky, are needed and probably induced by the beekeeper. But Lori Ann Garner and Kayla M. Miller make a solid argument against this reading. They dispute the binary terms in which the *wið* crux has been framed, wherein either the charm recognises that a swarm ‘is a good thing in itself’ (Storms 1948, 133) or treats the swarm as ‘an awesome and inauspicious event, to be combated by whatever means possible’ (Holton 1993, 42). Garner and Miller (2011, 361–65) instead argue that while swarms are necessary, they can be undesirable when they occur at the wrong time for the beekeeper’s purpose, and they claim that it is on such an occasion that the charm was intended to be performed.

While Garner and Miller’s account is convincing, *wið*’s polysemy corresponds, in my view, to the monk-beekeeper’s own ambivalent posture towards the swarm. Several studies have shown that part of this charm’s purpose is specifically to prevent the bees’ theft by another beekeeper (Osborn 2006, 279–83; Spamer 1978, 283; Fife 1939, 349). Part of this performance is thus addressed to other human animals, in a way that asserts a dominating relation of ownership over the bees. But the rest of the performance is addressed to the bees, in a way that complicates such a relation. The line ‘Næfre ge wilde to wuda fleogan’ (Never fly wild to the woods) could be read as an order or, like the ‘Adjuro te’ charm, it could be read as a plea or a prayer. The gestures that accompany the charm’s performance combine these tonal elements, wherein the charm’s

performer is both the owner of the bees and their dependent. Garner and Miller provide a helpful gloss of ‘forweorp ofer greot’ (throw dust over them), suggesting that this in fact refers to a practical action. If *greot* is understood as ‘fine dust,’ then throwing such material onto a swarm would actually inhibit the bees’ flight, increasing the chances that the swarm will settle nearby (Garner and Miller 2011, 366–67). If we adopt Garner and Miller’s reading, then the clause ‘forweorp ofer greot’ bridges the gap between performative act and practical action. Understood as a practical action, the throwing of the dust contrasts with the impotent stomping of the opening sentence, ‘oferweorp mid þinre swiþran handa under þinum swiþran fet’ (take some earth, throw it with your right hand under your right foot). The two prose sentences that precede the two stanzas of verse can thus be understood as presenting contrasting uses of earth/dirt/dust. The throwing of earth under the foot is pure performance, while the throwing of dust at the swarm may potentially have a material effect on the bees. The first reveals the monk-beekeeper’s dependence on the bees because he resorts to a performative gesture to attempt to direct the bees, while the second potentially exerts physical mastery.

This bee charm’s conflicted feelings contribute to the ambiguity of the bees’ gendering as *sigewif* (victory-women). This unique compound stands out in the absence of any other noun that directly refers to bees in the text.⁵ The bees’ femininity by itself is not remarkable. It emerges from the abundance of Latin sources that depict bees as women-like, from the femininity of the Old English word for *bee*, *beo* (Cameron et al. 2018, s.v. ‘bēo’), and the femininity of *apis*. But the *sige-* in *sigewif* diverges from the pattern of monastic bee literature. Bees here are not addressed as models either of chastity or learning, but as achievers of victory. For some scholars, *sigewif* figures the bees as ‘a metaphorical depiction of flying, stinging insects as powerful (often magical) female warriors in Germanic myth and legend known as valkyries’ (Garner and Miller 2011, 367). Such a specific cultural reference has, however, found its detractors (Storms 1948, 137–38), and it seems hardly necessary to explain the line. The heroic and military connotations of *sige-* could just as well be drawing on the abundance of military imagery in Virgil’s writing about bees (Virgil 1999a, 4.67–68 and 82–85; Virgil 1999b, 1.423–36; Rust 1999, 365–67; see also Baswell 1995). While this charm has often been read as secular, I am not the first to analyse it instead within a monastic context (Rust 1999, 362–65; Arthur 2018, 140–41); indeed, Raymond J. S. Grant (1979, 50) argues that the manuscript which preserves this charm may have been copied in the New Minster, a Benedictine abbey in Winchester. *Sigewif* is made up of a masculine noun, *sige*, and a neuter noun, *wif*, and together they form a grammatically neuter, nonbeenary term that draws on bees’ grammatical femininity, their female-to-ambiguous sex, and potentially

5 *Sigewif* does not appear in any other Old English text (diPaolo Healey 2009).



their masculine, military characteristics as well. Bees in this charm are the object of complicated feelings on the monk-beekeeper's part, and there is little suggestion that the beekeeper directly identifies with the bees. It seems that in the performative setting of this charm's use, bees are too close to the speaker for him to take the conceptual leap of identifying bees directly with monks. That leap is the topic of the following sections.

Mater apis: A female model of virtue for nonbeenary monks

In her study of the monk-bee trope, Anna Taylor shows that, in monastic writings of the ninth–tenth centuries, '[t]he bee gathering flowers is an allegory for a way of reading' and 'a meta-referential image that writers . . . used in a highly self-conscious way' (2005, 144–47). As enlightening as Taylor's analysis is, it dismisses one of the trope's defining features: the role of gender. Her discussion centres on an exchange between Johannes of Saint-Amand (fl. 1000) and Rainerus of Blandin (d. 1042). After reading Johannes's *Vita Rictrudis* (Life of Rictrude), Rainerus wrote a short letter to Johannes, in which he described Johannes as 'veluti mater apes' (just like a mother bee) (1979, 595–96). Taylor offers a penetrating analysis of the dense allusions of Rainerus's letter, and she acknowledges that Rainerus's use of the term *mater apis* is somewhat unusual compared to the many other instances of the monk-bee trope, which do not tend to use the term *mater*. But Taylor insists that this 'term does not gender Rainerus in a feminine role' (2005, 143). This odd claim is given little support outside of the unspoken cisnormative assumptions that motivate it. By denying the social significance of describing a monk as a *mater apis*, Taylor could be said to foreclose two kinds of transness: not only the monks' transness, but also bees' own divergence from the binary scheme of sexual difference.

How do bees diverge from the male/female binary? The answer can surprisingly be found in the very text Taylor cites to explain away the trans sense of Rainerus's letter. Taylor shows that the term *mater apis* is an allusion to 'the blessing of the Easter candle in the Gregorian sacramentary' (2005, 143) (she does not mention the 'Adjuro te mater aviorum' charm, perhaps because it would be impossible to prove a connection between it and Rainerus). The blessing tells how the candle 'alitur liquentibus ceris quam in substantiam praetiosae huius lampadis apis mater eduxit' (is nourished by flowing wax, which the mother bee brought forth into the substance of this precious light) (Deshusses 1971, 361–62; trans. in Taylor 2005, 143n170). In this blessing, the mother bee's gender is not an incidental detail, it is an essential feature of the bee's function as a

model of virtuous life and, by extension, of the wax's holiness. The bee is not only a 'model citizen' for her diligence, industriousness, and dedication to communal life (Hassig 1995, 52–61). She is also an exemplar of gendered sexual purity:

Ibique aliae inaestimabili arte, cellulas tenaci glutino instruunt, aliae liquantia mella stipant, aliae uertunt flores in caeram, aliae ore natos fingunt, aliae collectis e foliis nectar includunt. O uere beata et mirabilis apis, cuius nec sexum masculi uiolant, foetus non quassant, nec filii destruunt castitatem. Sicut sancta concepit uirgo maria, uirgo peperit, et uirgo permansit. (Deshusses 1971, 362)

[And here some, with remarkable skill, build little cells with sticky gum, others compress the flowing honey, some turn flowers into wax, others form the offspring in their mouth, some store up the nectar collected from plants. O truly blessed and marvellous bee, whose sex males do not violate, whose chastity offspring do not shake nor children tear apart! Just as the holy virgin Mary, conceived as a virgin, she gave birth, and remained a virgin.] (Trans. in Taylor 2005, 143–44n170)

Several aspects of this passage require explanation. The statement that some bees 'ore natos fingunt' (form the offspring in their mouth) refers to the medieval belief that bees reproduced parthenogenically, giving birth through their mouths without prior sexual contact. This belief leads to the bee's function as a model of virginity, as in this blessing's comparison to the Virgin Mary. Another crucial element of the bee's exemplarity and holiness is her femininity, a femininity which, in accordance with the medieval understanding of gender, is initially grammatical. This grammatical gendering can be observed in the text of the Easter candle blessing. As mentioned above, *apis* is grammatically feminine, resulting in a consistently feminine description of the bee in the blessing. The bee is 'beata' (blessed) in the feminine, and her parthenogenic reproduction means every bee is a mother, a *mater apis*. The comparison to Mary thus springs not only from the bee's behaviour, but also from her grammatical gender. The two words used for the bee's children, 'natos' and 'filii,' are masculine. But both are used to refer to the children of animals regardless of their sex (Gaffiot 1934, s.vv. 'natus' and 'filius'). The bee's gender is further complicated by the assertion that 'nec sexum masculi uiolant' (males do not violate their sex). It may at first appear that in this clause, the blessing asserts that male bees do not mate with female bees. However, a different interpretation is possible. For one thing, if these male bees do not mate with the female bees, what do they actually do? Outside of this clause and the sex-neutral references to children, the blessing's account of



the bee is consistently feminine. I would suggest that the bee's unviolated 'sexum' is more than her literal virginity, it is also the uniformly feminine gender of the bee as a species. Indeed, *sexus* is used across medieval sources to refer to grammatical gender (du Cange 1887, s.v. 'sexus'; Latham, Howlett, and Ashdowne 2013, s.v. 'sexus'). The clause 'nec sexum masculini uiolant' can therefore be taken to mean that the bees' uniform femininity is not tarnished by the existence of any masculine bees.

This reading is in line with the medieval reception of ancient sources on bee sex and sexual behaviour. Some ancient sources, such as Pliny the Elder, do refer to the existence of masculine drones (*fuci*). But for Pliny, these drones are 'imperfectae apes novissimaeque, a fessis et iam emeritis inchoatae, serotinus fetus et quasi servitia verarum apium' (imperfect bees and the newest made, the incomplete product of those that are exhausted and now discharged from service, a late brood, and as it were the servants of the true bees) (1983, 11.11). Pliny thus sees in bees an inversion of the Aristotelian model of sex difference, according to which, famously, 'the female is as it were a deformed male' (Aristotle 1942, 2.737a27). While Aristotle's own writings on animals were not directly translated into Latin until the thirteenth century (Steel 1999, 14; van Oppenraay 2020), the picture he draws of a wide diversity of theories regarding bees' anomalous reproduction (Aristotle 1970, 2.5.21) would have been recognisable to a scholar of the ninth–tenth centuries. The likeliest source for the Gregorian sacramentary's assertion of the bee's virginity is the influential account given by Saint Ambrose (c. 389), who came to be known as the patron saint of beekeepers (Free 1982, 104–5). Ambrose implies that bees are not sexually differentiated, since he states that 'communis omnibus generatio, integritas quoque corporis uirginalis omnibus communis et partus, quoniam nec inter se ullo concubitu miscentur' (The act of generation is common to all. Their bodies are uncontaminated in the common act of parturition, since they have no part in conjugal embraces) (1896, 5.21.67; trans. in Ambrose 1961). Ambrose's reference to the 'rex' (king) (1896, 5.21.68) of the bees seems to draw a contrast between the bees' sexual makeup (in which Ambrose implies that bees are all female), and their political organisation, in which it seems that a masculine king rules over feminine subjects. Ambrose's most influential reader, Saint Augustine, does not repeat Ambrose's picture of bee politics. Instead, Augustine extrapolates from Ambrose's account of bees' reproduction that bees 'nihil sit maris et feminae' (have nothing male or female) (2018, 15.27.8). On this basis, Augustine argues, bees were excluded from Noah's ark, which only accepted sexually dimorphic animals (2018, 15.27.7).

Sources in natural history which were available to monks around 800–1070 therefore describe bees in terms that disagree on the question of

their precise sexual makeup, but all agree that bees exhibit something unlike binary sex difference, and this understanding is often anchored in a perception of bees as exclusively female, or as female by default, or as without sex. Gender and sexuality are not incidental or modern connotations for Rainerus's description of Johannes as a *mater apis*. Nonbeenary gender is at the core of the monastic understanding of the bee as a model of virtue, a model that is especially relevant to the studious monk. Rainerus's letter to Johannes can be understood as positively affirming Johannes's femininity, a femininity that is expressed by the contact with books and with the art of grammar, by dedication to communal life, and by chastity. These three distinctive traits set monks apart from the rest of medieval society. By recognising a natural, nonhuman model for these traits in bees, monastic writers such as Rainerus are thinking through the ways they are carrying out God's will while living in ways that diverge from the rest of their species. Rainerus is praising the extent to which Johannes is like a *mater apis*, and thus, implicitly, unlike a man. Transspecies identification helps locate monastic identity outside of the strict male/female binary.

Nonbeenary writing in hagiographic literature

The blessing of the Easter candle in the Gregorian sacramentary includes a central feature of the bee trope in monastic literature: the phrase 'legere flosculos' (to pick small flowers) and variants thereof (Deshusses 1971, 362). When it occurs in works of monastic literature such as Rainerus's letter to Johannes, this phrase puns on *legere*, meaning both 'to read' and 'to pick' (in this case, flowers), and alludes to the term *florilegium* for a literary collection (Taylor 2005, 133). The bee trope in monastic literature not only centres on nonbeenary gender and its affordances as a site of identification for monastic readers and writers, it also situates that gender in the grammatical field. By that I mean that the grammatical femininity of the noun *apis* is not an incidental detail in texts that compare monks to bees. Rather, the comparison between monks and bees consistently thinks of the bee as both a model for virtue and a model for literary learning and production, which in this period is almost always synonymous with grammatical learning and production (Irvine 1994). Bees are meaningful to monks as feminine, and bees' femininity is meaningful as grammatical femininity.

This final section of the article turns to instances of the monk-bee trope that explore its gendered affordances, but in a more subdued or ambivalent mode than Rainerus's letter to Johannes. In his metric *Vita Aegili* (Life of Aegil), the ninth-century German monk Candidus Bruun



gives an account of his master Aegil's monastic education in nonbeenary terms:

Utque apis esuriens primo cum tempore veris
 Enitens paribus volitat per gramina pennis,
 Campigenosque sibi certat decerpere flores,
 Altius inde volans glaucas stridentibus alis
 Nunc salices, nunc namque pyrum platanumque nitentem
 Floribus ore legit, tiliam fervore recenti hinc
 Mellifluam satagit caeco sub condere tecto:
 Haud secus hic iuvenis librorum carmine primum
 Corticibus veluti rasis quis pascitur acris,
 Donec vi quoque non propria, sed munere Christi
 Proficiens aetate simul sensuque sagaci
 Pasci promeruit umbrati nectaris haustu. (1884, 98)

[And, like a hungry bee when in the first time of spring it flies ascending through the grasses with balanced wings [*pennae*] and strives to pluck the flowers growing in the countryside, then flying higher on humming wings, with its mouth it picks [*legere*] now the grey willows, now the fiery plane-tree blooming with flowers, from here it bustles about the honeyed lime-tree, with renewed vigour, to hide it under its concealed shelter. No differently does this youth first graze on the poetry of books, like the sharp resin of maple trees, until, not by his own power, but by the service of Christ, accomplished in age and in acute wisdom, he earned a drink of the shaded nectar.]

This passage from Candidus displays the key elements of the bee trope as described by Taylor, including a pun on *legere*, and another pun on *penna*, meaning both 'wing' and 'pen' (Gaffiot 1934, s.v. 'penna'). In Rainerus's letter to Johannes, what I call nonbeenary gender appears principally as the identification of a monk with emphatically feminine bees. In this section of the *Vita Aegili*, nonbeenary gender instead opens up a space of monk-bee identification that is indeterminate, epicene, or ungended. Where Rainerus's letter and the blessing of the Easter candle both describe the bee with feminine terms such as 'mater' and 'beata,' Candidus instead accumulates present participles such as 'esuriens' (hungry), 'enitens' (ascending), 'volans' (flying). Because present participles are declined identically whether they agree with feminine or masculine nouns, this piling on of participles smoothes out the bee's femininity, placing the bee in a space that is open to both feminine and masculine gender agreement. This indeterminate space of the present participle allows for the overlap between Aegil and the bee to extend beyond metaphorical meaning and

into grammar as well. Aegil is referred to in the masculine as ‘hic iuvenis’ (this youth), but the only other term that declines according to gender in these lines, and with which *iuvenis* agrees, is a present participle, *proficiens*, which is not marked as masculine. Present participles thus extend the connection between the bee and the young monk into the realm of grammar and grammatical gender. Monastic education brings the young man into contact with a nonbeenary gender that unfolds in an epicene grammatical space.

This nonbeenary way of writing about bees and monks whereby the present participle marks out the bee-monk interface as a space of gender indeterminacy appears in several pieces of monastic writing. Taylor links this use of present participles to what she describes as the stock phrase *prudens apis* (wise bee). However, because she overlooks nuances of gender, Taylor does not confront the diversity of forms this trope takes. Often, especially in earlier sources, the term used is not the gender-ambiguous *prudens*, but the markedly feminine superlative *prudenterissima* (wisest). According to Taylor (2005, 138), *prudens apis* initially comes from Athanasius of Alexandria’s Greek *Life of Saint Anthony* (c. 357) in which Anthony is a ‘sophe melissa’ (wise bee) (Athanasius of Alexandria 1994, 13). In the most popular Latin translation of Athanasius, Evagrius of Antioch (d. 393) chooses the superlative form of the adjective: ‘apis prudentissima’ (2018, 7). The same superlative form also appears in Cassian’s *Institutiones* (*Institutes*, c. 420–424), in which Cassian advises monks to draw inspiration for their virtue from a diversity of models, just as the *apis prudentissima* gathers pollen from a diversity of flowers (1965, 194–96). In Cassian’s *Institutiones*, the bee, marked as feminine, not only appears as a model of monastic prudence, but also as a model for how to select models of virtue. In one of his sermons, Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) enjoins his monastic ‘fratres’ (brothers) to pick the flowers of scripture like ‘apes prudentissimae’ (1953, 831). The same analogy between the monastic learning of scripture and ‘prudenterissima apes’ appears in Bern of Reichenau’s (d. 1048) *Vita Sancti Uodalrici* (Life of Saint Ulrich) (2008, 3.20). In Wulfstan of Winchester’s *Vita Sancti Æthelwoldi* (Life of Saint Æthelwold, c. 996–1000), this notion of the bee as not only a model of monastic virtue, but also of monastic learning expands to include the grammatical and poetic arts as bee-like disciplines. This prose hagiography narrates Æthelwold’s education in the following terms: ‘Didicit namque inibi liberalem grammaticae artis peritiam atque mellifluam metricae rationis dulcedinem, et more apis prudentissimae, quae solet boni odoris arbores circumuolando requirere’ (There [Glastonbury] he became skilled in the liberal art of grammar and the honeyed order of metrics, like a most prudent bee that habitually flits around looking for scented trees) (Wulfstan of Winchester 1991, 14). Here too, the bee’s



femininity is marked by the superlative form ‘*prudentissimae*,’ suggesting that by adopting the bee’s virtuous learning, Æthelwold is taking on some of her femininity.

In his own hagiographical work, Rainerus chooses instead to use the gender-ambiguous form *prudens apis*, departing from the tradition of *prudentissima apis* in favour of *prudens*’s ambivalence. Rainerus wrote several texts on Saint Gislenus, a seventh-century monk from Hainault. In his *Vita Gisleni* (Life of Gislenus), Rainerus describes the monks who gathered around Gislenus and then returned to their monasteries: ‘ut prudens apes quaeque florum dulcia fert ad alvearia, sic deferebant ad sua claustra quaeque virtutum germina, unde pascerentur fidelium corda’ (as each wise bee bears the sweetness of the flowers to the hive, thus they were carrying off to their own individual monasteries seeds of virtues, from which they might nourish the hearts of the faithful) (Latin in Rainerus 1886, 238; trans. in Taylor 2005, 142n164). In this sentence, the monks-as-bees who gather around Gislenus-as-flower are not explicitly gendered. They are identified with the *prudens apis*, a phrase that draws the monk-bee into an ungended or gender-liminal space. Bees’ grammatical femininity is similarly downplayed in the hagiographies written by Heriger of Lobbes (d. 1007). In two works, the *Vita Remacii* (Life of Rémacle) and the *Vita Hadalini* (Life of Hadelin), Heriger writes about religious men swarming around a saint ‘velut apes ad alvearia confluere’ (like bees swarming to the hive) (1880a, 1143; 1880b, 1163),⁶ in a formulation that renders bees’ grammatical gender invisible. Perhaps this is Heriger’s way of negotiating the monk-bee comparison: to trans the bee by bringing it into a less gendered textual space of comparison, without however modifying the bee’s grammatical gender in the manner of ‘Columcille’s Circle.’

I have already discussed how Rainerus draws an emphatically feminine picture of monks-as-bees in his letter to Johannes, and in his *Miracula Gisleni* (Miracles of Gislenus), the figure of the *mater apis* seems to make a reappearance. A passage of the *Miracula* describes the monastic community as a nurturing community of learned bees:

mentes accendunt igne divini amoris, seque ita invicem hortantur ad cotidianum cumentum monachicae eruditionis, ut videres aliquos, more apum pastos floribus, superni roris dulcia quaeque deferre ad alvearia communis mansionis, alios vero, claustra servantes divinae religionis, onera suscipere venientum propriis humeris, mellaque certatim stipare in canistris atque dulcedine diversorum florum caste pieque fetus educere. (Rainerus 1886, 269)

[they kindle their minds with the fire of divine love, thus they exhort one another in turn to the daily increase of monastic learning, with

6 For more on Heriger and his environmental context, see Arnold (2013).

the result that you may see some, having feasted on flowers in the manner of bees, carrying away all the sweetness of heavenly dew to the hives of their shared dwelling, while others, maintaining the monasteries of divine religion, to bear the burdens of new arrivals upon their own shoulders, in competition pack the honey in baskets and with the sweetness of diverse flowers raise up the young chastely and piously.] (my translation, with reference to Taylor 2005, 142n166)

In light of Rainerus's description of Johannes as a *mater apis*, it is apparent that Rainerus is here depicting the monastic community as the site of something like a nonbeenary found family. The adverb 'caste' (chastely) evokes the bees' parthenogenic, virginal reproduction, and identifies this form of reproduction with monastic education. Monks find not only a model of virtue and learning in the bee's feminine chastity, but also a pedagogical model. If Johannes is the mother of an edifying, learned text, the monks in this passage are the mothers of their students. At the same time, Rainerus uses several masculine terms ('aliquos,' 'pastos,' 'alios') to refer to the monks—this is a more masculine form of motherhood than Johannes's.

Monastic life brings the monks' masculinity into contact with the bees' feminine virtue, and this nonbeenary contact is powerfully dramatised in another work by Rainerus, his *Sermo super miracula Gisleni* (Sermon on Gislenus's miracles).

Qua dulcedine spiritus servi Dei recreatus ad se rediens laetus, et velut apes paradisi depasta flores, alvearia fratrum revisens, totus mellifluus omnes hortabatur nec mortale sonans, ut gustarent quam suavis est Dominus. (1886, 243)

[Through the sweetness of the service of God was he [Gislenus] restored to himself and returned to happiness, and just like the bee having feasted on paradise's flowers, looking again to the hives of his brothers, the wholly honey-voiced man, sounding unlike a mortal, kept exhorting all that they may taste how sweet the Lord is.]

This passage stands out from the other instances of the bee trope I have discussed, because it juxtaposes feminine terms for the bee ('depasta') with masculine terms for the monk ('laetus,' 'mellifluus'). However, this juxtaposition does not render the monk and the bee unreconcilably alien to one another, nor does it serve to draw a barrier between them on the grounds of gender and species. Rather, in this sermon, the masculine monk's adoption of the feminine bee's virtue allows for the sonic transcendence of the monk's humanity. Indeed, Taylor emphasises this aspect of the passage by translating



‘nec mortale sonans’ as ‘sounding forth in a manner that was not human’ (2005, 142n167). The nonbeenary, transspecies contact between Gislenus and the bee raises his voice into a honeyed, heavenly frequency.

Conclusion

These experiments in nonbeenary gender build on the intersecting traditions of monastic and liturgical writing, along with natural history and apicultural practice to explore the possibility of a virtuous life outside of the male/female binary. Monastic writers imagine this nonbeenary life using the specific affordances of grammatical gender both written and spoken. Because these monastic writers take bees to be not only models of chastity and gender variance, but also models of grammatical and literary learning, bees become ideal figures for the invention of grammatically marked genders. These texts capture monks negotiating and refiguring their own identities by crossing borders between genders and species. As the first two sections of this article show, the relationship between monks and bees was a prevalent aspect of monastic life, but it was not without its moments of tension. Monks exploited the labour of bees, and this use sometimes manifested in antagonistic interactions, such as can be glimpsed in ‘Wið ymbe.’ High-medieval monastic writing draws on the natural science and bestiary traditions to find in bees a model for communal life. With their exemplary virtue and sophisticated social organisation, bees appear to live in a society that is linked to but different from human society, mirroring the relation between monastic communities and lay communities. Bees and monks alike can be glimpsed queering the binary of human and animal, just as they queer the binary of male and female. By comparing themselves to bees, medieval monks turn divergence into an ideal.

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