

Queering Polymorphic Jesus in the Early Christian Acts of John and in Seventeenth-Century French Ursuline Lived Religion¹

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The idea of Jesus as a hybrid of God and human forms the basis of Dyophysite Christology. The various forms and shapes Jesus takes on – their polymorphism – has been less studied, and never from a queer theoretical perspective. In this article, we study the polymorphism of Jesus in two different marginalized sources.² In the first section, we examine an early Christian source called the Acts of John, an extra-canonical³ text that as such has received little research. In the second section, we analyse a previously little-known seventeenth-century obituary notice describing the mystical experiences of Etiennette Guyot, a young French Ursuline nun. Guyot is part of a tradition of visionary women whose spiritual experiences earned her admiration within the Order and that can be termed as lived religion. By lived religion, we understand her visions as part of a wider societal framework and a dynamic interaction between believers, ecclesiastical authorities, God, and saints, in addition to one's local community. In short, we view Guyot's visions as "living out" or producing an interpretation of religious concepts of her time and of Christian mystical tradition that challenged official religion and power structures.⁴

As part of our queer theoretical approach, we consider our sources as "open meshes of possibilities" to grasp anything that is at "odds with the normal," to follow the formulations of two classic queer theorists, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and David Halperin. For us, queer is about nonconforming gender and sexuality that deconstruct hierarchies and dichotomies. We also employ the term genderqueer to refer specifically to bodies beyond gender. For the purposes of this article, in our definition of queer we include transformation and elusiveness beyond gender, which we believe makes the term even better suited to religious studies.⁵

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First, we argue that Jesus' polymorphism makes them queer. In both sources the central manifestations of Jesus' polymorphism include variation in age (an adult and a child), in stature (small and large), and from a material being to an immaterial being (including light and voice). In our view, this fits the description of queer and should be acknowledged as such. Second, we

argue that Jesus can be queered in the earliest Christian writings, and even more so in later Christian lived religion, where Jesus' polymorphism held substantial potential for women mystics seeking spiritual authority.

With this article, we highlight the long queer tradition in Christianity, which has received little attention within and outside academia. We hope to contribute to the ongoing deconstruction of the gender system in the West and promote the position of LGBTQI+ communities worldwide.

Defining Polymorphism

Derived from Greek, the term polymorphy (πολύμορφος) could be literally translated as having (or comprising) several shapes or forms. Polymorphism is closely connected to metamorphosis (μεταμόρφωσις), or shape shifting, which means that at any moment a person or deity can assume another form, stature, or age. Metamorphosis includes changes in materiality, for example, one's body becoming soft or hard. How long the change of form lasts also differs.⁶

Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland have proposed that stories of human or divine metamorphoses were crucial narratives for handling questions of "self, personal identity, and the paradox or problem of change in human selves and shapes."⁷ Thus, stories of metamorphoses were not unusual in antiquity, whether they told of humans or deities transforming into animals, plants, or different-looking humans.⁸ Ultimately, polymorphism supports the idea that divine beings do not have any fixed appearances, but can take several different forms.⁹ Although the idea of deities' many forms was widespread in antiquity, the term "polymorphy" is rarely used in the New Testament scholarship, partly because of the narrow definition of polymorphism. In the strictest sense, Pieter Lalleman has defined that "Polymorphy is a metamorphosis of such a kind that the person or deity can be seen differently by different people *at the same time*."¹⁰ In our reading, Lalleman's definition is too rigid, as freer use of polymorphism will aid research, and create new opportunities to interpret the subject.

In historical research on medieval and early modern religiosity, polymorphism has never been used as an analytical category before. Medievalists¹¹ have implicitly identified the polymorphism of Jesus (without using the term) in relation to the body, and some research exists for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scholars have argued, with some animosity, that the bodily manifestations of Jesus as wounded were a central object of devotion especially in medieval women's lived religious practices. Queer readings of this kind of mysticism have been made, focusing (from our viewpoint narrowly) on gender and sexuality.¹²

In this article, we use polymorphism as an umbrella term for the whole phenomenon of Jesus' several manifestations. Jesus' polymorphism is present when they appear in different forms (to one or more persons, simultaneously or consequently). Although occurrences of metamorphoses can be ordinary (different ages, attractiveness, beard etc.) or extraordinary (reaching to heaven, immaterial, light etc.),¹³ we categorize both kinds of occurrences as examples of polymorphism. After all, is it not extraordinary that Jesus changes form at all?

Polymorphism of Jesus in the New Testament

New Testament texts do not include descriptions of Jesus' outward human appearance.¹⁴ More information is gained about their post-resurrection appearance, although it is most remarkable that the disciples had a hard time recognizing Jesus. Narratives of Jesus, who appears in multiple forms (πολύμορφος) to their disciples, were common in early Christian writings. One possible reason for Jesus' polymorphism could be the rapid spread of Christianity – in different traditions, Christ had multiple forms but, consequently, not one proper form.¹⁵ According to Zlatko Pleše, Jesus' polymorphism was a tough subject for the first theologians as there was no one "orthodox" explanation for it.¹⁶

Although scholars before us have not seen New Testament writings as examples of Jesus' polymorphism, in our reading Jesus' polymorphism is already visible in the canonical gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus goes through transfiguration, and is described as changing form (μορφή) and shining like the sun (Matt 7:2; Mark 9:2-18; Luke 9:28-31). In Luke, encounters with the resurrected Jesus are even more bizarre, including scenes where the disciples do not at first recognize Jesus, and when they do, they believe they have seen a ghost (Luke 24:36-37). Jesus appears to the disciples, says that a ghost does not have flesh and bones, and encourages them to look at Jesus' own hands and feet (24:37-40). Jesus then eats in the disciples' presence, which highlights Jesus' humanity¹⁷ even more (24:41-43). Polymorphism is visible also in Philippians, where Jesus is described as having two different forms, that of a God and a slave (Phil 2:5-8).

In the Gospel of John, the most remarkable transfiguration scenes occur after Jesus' resurrection. In the first verses, Mary of Magdala seeks Jesus but (believes she) sees a gardener. Only when Jesus addresses Mary by name does she recognize Jesus (John 20:13-16). Yet in the next verse Jesus forbids Mary to touch them as "I have not yet ascended to the Father" (20:17). What could this mean? Jesus is a work in progress, not touchable anymore but not entirely heavenly either. Soon after this, Jesus suddenly appears to other disciples, who are hiding behind closed doors, and encourages Thomas to touch Jesus' wound (20:26-28).¹⁸ So Jesus has some kind of a body, which is marked by stigmata, but appears (or teleports) through walls. In contrast to previous scholarship, we argue that the bodily changes in Jesus' post-resurrection scenes can be interpreted as polymorphism, since Jesus' body literally has *multiple different forms*.

Polymorphism of Jesus in the Acts of John

According to Candida Moss, the extra-canonical Acts of the apostles are where "Jesus becomes truly polymorphic."¹⁹ In this set of early Christian literature, the Acts of John indeed includes the clearest (but not the only)²⁰ examples of Jesus' polymorphism, making it the main source for this first section of the article. The Acts of John is one example of the early Christian *Acta* (Acts) literature, which comprises stories of what individual disciples did and taught after the resurrection of Jesus.²¹ Such extra-canonical texts preserved memorable traditions about biblical themes and persons, and often mimicked

the literary genres of the New Testament and Hebrew Bible.²² Although these texts are not included in canonical bibles, the narratives preserved in them had great influence on the worldviews of early Christians – and emphasize the polyphony of early Christian lives.²³

The Acts of John is a collection of traditions surrounding the figure of the apostle John, from various sources.²⁴ The text was composed in the second and/or third centuries.²⁵ Interestingly, it contains no direct citations from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament.²⁶ The text is available only as a modern reconstruction from three medieval manuscripts, two of which are identical, whereas the third does not overlap with them at all.²⁷ The essential elements of the reconstruction are generally accepted as accurate. The most important chapters concerning polymorphism are 87–105, which appear only in one manuscript (Codex Vindobonensis). These chapters are probably composed later than the other parts of the text.²⁸ Therefore, there is no one coherent message in chapters 87–105, which have a different focus (polymorphic Christ) than the chapters before and after.²⁹ The rest of the Acts of John follows the genre of extra-canonical Acts more clearly in narrating the life and miracles of the apostle John.

The Acts of John presents Jesus as God and human; even earthly Jesus can appear in several forms at a time. Scholars of the Acts of John, most notably Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, have found valuable comparisons with the polymorphism of ancient Egyptian gods.³⁰ The idea that gods did not have one fixed appearance is more familiar in Egyptian context. For Junod and Kaestli, Jesus' polymorphism in the Acts of John is parallel to that of Egyptian deities: Jesus' appearance is so undefinable and unchanging that it cannot be captured to one specific form. Compared to Egyptian sources, however, the polymorphism in the Acts of John is really simple.³¹ Jesus does not have any fixed or permanent body, they change their form constantly, and do not appear in the same form twice. All the representations of Jesus are divine apparitions, and in our reading this polymorphic diversity fortifies the idea of queer Jesus.

Next, we introduce the polymorphic manifestations of Jesus: as a child, as naked, in varying statures, in different substances, as a light, and as a voice.

JESUS AS A CHILD

He [Jesus] came to me and to my brother James, saying, "I have need of you, come unto me." And my brother said, "John, this child on the shore who called to us, what does he want?" And I said, "What child?" He replied, "The one who is beckoning to us." And I answered, "Because of our long watch that we kept at sea you are not seeing straight, brother James: but do you not see the man who stands there, fair and comely and of a cheerful countenance?"³²

In this first scene, brothers James and John encounter Jesus; James sees Jesus in the form of a child and John as a fair and beautiful man. The brothers do not seem to recognize Jesus as they appear in different forms. Jesus appearing as a child was not an unusual topic in early Christian writings.³³ In antiquity, childhood was connected to physical weakness, inability to speak, and lack of capacity to reason. At the same time, childhood was filled with positive qualities, such as innocence, and humility.³⁴ One of the motifs for Jesus' polymorphism could be the theological themes behind the text: Jesus'

polymorphism highlights God's greatness, as God reveals himself according to people's capabilities.³⁵ Thus, Jesus' manifestation as a child could imply that they appeared to "small as small." Thus James would be the small, meaning innocent, childlike, or unexperienced, to whom Jesus appeared in a similar form. Then again, to John, Jesus appeared as a grown man. Later in the same verse, Jesus appears again, this time to James as a "youth whose beard was just starting," and to John as "bald-headed with a thick and flowing beard."³⁶ For James, Jesus' manifestation had grown from a child to a youth.

The different appearances of Jesus could reflect the varying levels of spiritual insight in those to whom they appear. Yet, Junod and Kaestli argue that Jesus manifesting as a child implies only that they (as a god) do not have age, size, or form, and that God is present eternally. These scholars do not agree that Jesus adapts according to John or James' capabilities. A child and a bearded man are anyhow among the most common characteristics of divine apparitions.³⁷

Scenes where Jesus appears as a child include most hints about Jesus' gender expressions. Child (παιδίον) is neuter in Greek, but man (ἄνδρα) is masculine. Jesus is also referred to as a human (ἄνθρωπος) and youth (νεανίσκος),³⁸ both of which are grammatically masculine. Although Jesus is polymorphic, they are not formless. Strangely, all these multiple human forms in which Jesus manifests emphasize their humanity. A man, however, is not the only form Jesus takes - they appear as a child and youth, too - and it does not subdue all other possibilities.

JESUS NAKED AND WITH VARYING STATURE

Now I, because he [Jesus] loved me [John], went to him quietly as though he should not see, and stood looking upon his back. And I saw that he was not dressed in garments, but was seen by us as naked and not at all like a man; his feet were whiter than snow, so that the ground there was lit up by his feet, and his head reached to heaven; so that I was afraid and cried out, and he turned and appeared as a man of small stature, and took hold of my beard and pulled it and said to me, "John, be not unbelieving, but believing, and not inquisitive." [...] I suffered such pain for thirty days at the place where he took hold of my beard."³⁹

This scene has similarities with the Synoptic Gospels' transfiguration scenes, on which scholars agree that the polymorphism of the Acts of John could be based.⁴⁰ In this verse, Jesus is shifting shape multiple times. First, Jesus is seen as naked and not at all like a man, with feet whiter than snow, so that their feet lit up the ground around them. At the same time, Jesus' head reaches to heaven. When John startles and cries out, Jesus again shifts to a man of small stature. This sudden shift in Jesus' stature does not have any model in the canonical gospels. According to Junod and Kaestli, the juxtaposition between the immense Jesus reaching to heaven and the small human Jesus again illustrates the fact that deities do not have shape or stature.⁴¹ In our view, this particular scene underlines the fright that John experiences on seeing Jesus. Jesus, however, responds to John's fright by pulling his beard. This seemingly harmless act portrays Jesus in a more malicious light.

When John sneaks up on Jesus, ("because he loved me," John explains) and sees only Jesus' back,⁴² though naked and not at all like a man, John is

frightened. Jesus' naked body does not resemble the body of a man – or a human. Potter has argued that the human body is only a garment; without any shield, John sees Jesus as they really are.⁴³ This scares the bejesus out of John. Jesus' naked back is something that only a non-human could have, thus it is the best possible example of Jesus' divinity.⁴⁴

In this scene, the different manifestations of Jesus change abruptly. Jesus forms their identity constantly all over again. Thus, Jesus' polymorphism is parallel to modern-day queer identities. No category is definitive. One can go through multiple transformations in life: name, looks, clothes, voice, gender, and more can all change but the person stays the same. Jesus shares the identity of queerness; this fluidity should be the ultimate leading trait of Jesus.

JESUS' MATERIAL CHANGES

*[T]here was in him another marvel; when I sat at the table he would take me upon his breast and I held him; and sometimes his breast felt to me to be smooth and tender, and sometimes hard, like stone.*⁴⁵

*Sometimes when I meant to touch him, I met a material and solid body; and at other times again when I felt him, the substance was immaterial and bodiless and as if it were not existing at all.*⁴⁶

The tenderness of Jesus' breast could be interpreted as an allusion to motherhood and femininity. The nursing Jesus became a recurrent theme in later Christian mysticism and has received significant scholarly attention by both feminist and queer scholars since the 1980s.⁴⁷ In our reading, the conflation of smoothness and hardness makes Jesus' body signify as male, female, and something beyond the gender binary. The fact that the Acts of John mentions Jesus' naked body, Jesus' breast, and solid body multiple times creates erotic implications. The eroticism between John and Jesus, however, cannot be termed as homoeroticism implying sexual energy between two males since Jesus exhibits genderqueerness. The apparent dichotomy in smoothness and hardness, solidness and bodilessness are questioned as Jesus is described to be both/and. This is one of the prime examples of queering Jesus: showing that their nature and actions ultimately deconstruct the dichotomies attached to their nature. It becomes clear that during Jesus' earthly life, their physical form represents fluidity and is in constant flux. Jesus takes both ordinary and extraordinary forms interacting with multiple different senses (hearing, seeing, touching).⁴⁸ In this scene, the sense of touch is most important as the polymorphism of Jesus is evident in their substance: all the attributes are perceivable with the sense of touch. Jesus' polymorphism is thus visible through seeing and touching – and hearing, as can be seen in the next and final manifestations discussed here.

JESUS AS AN IMMATERIAL LIGHT AND VOICE

The Acts of John does not include resurrection or post-resurrection narratives. Hence, the crucifixion is the culmination in the Acts of John.⁴⁹ The crucifixion scene has similarities with those in the canonical gospels, though with a very different emphasis: Jesus does not suffer. Nowhere does the text mention that Jesus experienced any kind of human suffering during the crucifixion. In

chapter 97, John recounts that Jesus stood in the cave with him and at the same time was crucified below the mountain in Jerusalem. Thus, in the cave, Jesus had some kind of physical body.

*And when he was hung upon the cross on Friday, at the sixth hour of the day, there came darkness over all the earth. And my Lord stood in the middle of the cave and lit it up.*⁵⁰

*[Jesus] showed me [to John] a cross of light set up, and around the cross a great multitude which had no one form; and in the cross was one form and one likeness. And the Lord himself I beheld above the cross, not having a shape, but only a voice, and a voice not such as was familiar to us, but a sweet and kind voice and one truly divine.*⁵¹

The best interpretation for the cross of light is that Jesus is the cross itself, and thus the cross is one manifestation of the polymorphic Jesus. Jesus appears simultaneously *above* the cross, *as* the cross, and yet in the middle of the cave. Thus, Jesus manifests himself in three polymorphic appearances at once.⁵² In fact, the cross of light is described as the Word, Mind, Jesus, Christ, Door, Way, Bread, Seed, Resurrection, Son, Father, Spirit, Life, Truth, Faith, and Grace.⁵³ These descriptions illustrate Jesus' multiple forms, and are included in the polymorphic manifestations of Jesus. During the crucifixion scene Jesus is for the first time clearly formless and immaterial: a cross, a light, and a voice.

Although Jesus has been clearly divine, and manifested himself in various forms, the forms before the crucifixion scene have been more human-like, although Jesus' nakedness revealed that they are definitely not human. The Acts of John gives extremely mixed signals: they emphasize Jesus' humanity as portraying them as a child and a youth, yet even the human forms of Jesus are far from *human*. The case study of the Acts of John allows us to conclude that polymorphism itself is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Like queer, polymorphism escapes definitions and strict categories; it is hard to give it any prototypes. Claiming that the lack of consistent evidence is the proof of something may seem absurd but in the case of queerness, it is actually the best possible proof. Thus, polymorphic Jesus is also queer Jesus.

Polymorphism of Jesus in the Early Modern Period

The biblical and extra-canonical early Christian interpretations of Jesus as polymorphic had far-reaching influence. Although medieval theologians disputed the legitimacy of extra-canonical texts, they were properly defined as extra-canonical in the early eighteenth century. Medieval and early modern lived religion testifies to the rich use, interpretation, and even conflation of biblical and extra-biblical texts, especially in hagiography and other spiritual literature, iconography, drama, music, and individual and collective spiritual practices.⁵⁴ Thus, the figure of polymorphic Jesus coined in early Christianity remained an important part of later religious culture, as the case study in this second section attests.

The basis of the study in this part is an Ursuline obituary notice discussing the mystical experiences of a nun called Etiennette Guyot, in religion

“de Sainte Catherine,” who served in the convent of Beaune in Eastern France from 1641 until her death in 1649, aged only 22.⁵⁵ Guyot’s exceptional mystical experiences were recorded in an obituary collection compiled in the 1670s by Mother Pommereu, serving in the Parisian motherhouse.⁵⁶ Guyot’s obituary notice (like the compilation as a whole) was part of the burgeoning visionary literature of the century and as such, one manifestation of lived religion which balanced official and unofficial religiosity. Women’s mysticism was always a sensitive issue, and some visionaries were accused of demonic possession.⁵⁷ Although Guyot’s visions became established as part of canonical Ursuline devotional literature, they were intended for reading only within the Order, and an official cult was never established around her.

THE CHRIST CHILD

Etienne Guyot’s obituary notice is one of the longest in Pommereu’s collection.⁵⁸ It is rich in mystical encounters and carries echoes of both canonical and extra-canonical writings about Jesus. Guyot entered the novitiate at the Ursuline convent in Beaune at the age of fifteen and took her vows three and a half years later, in 1645. About six months after that, she began to experience Jesus more intensely than before.⁵⁹ Following the medieval tradition commented upon in the section on polymorphism, the wounded body of Jesus was a predominant theme in her visions.⁶⁰ Yet, Jesus appeared to her most often in the form of a child,⁶¹ which makes this aspect in Guyot’s image of Jesus worth a closer look.

Devotion to the Christ Child has its roots firmly in the Middle Ages,⁶² and it became even more popular in seventeenth-century French lived Catholicism. Devotion to the Infant Jesus attracted all sexes, but held more potential for women’s empowerment. Self-annihilation through identification with the Christ Child was a way to strive for spiritual power within the male-led church.⁶³

The significance of the Infant Jesus in the obituary notice is first and foremost linked to the portrayal of Guyot’s individual spiritual growth, but also to communal aspects. The chapter on her novitiate, refers to her time as a postulant: “Judging herself unworthy to suffer from great things [afflictions] in the manner of the Saints, she had decided to make herself small in order to honour the smallness of Jesus.”⁶⁴ This passage suggests that the Infant Jesus was a symbol for Guyot’s spiritual growth, in which she proceeded moderately, which was a typical rhetoric device in contemporary women’s mysticism.⁶⁵ The text in the same chapter on the novitiate goes on to describe Guyot’s figure as very small, strengthening the symbolic ties between her and the Infant Jesus.

One apparition of the Infant Jesus had a communal aspect, connecting the obituary notice to accounts with similar motives in late medieval German sister books.⁶⁶ After taking her vows, Guyot experienced troubles in the community due to her odd behaviour. After one instance of being held in contempt, she noticed at her side a beautiful child dressed in a luminous snow-white robe. After a second incidence, the child appeared again but bigger in size. After a third incident, Guyot once more saw the child, who then surpassed her significantly in height. Growth had also made the face of the child more beautiful.⁶⁷ The vision gave Guyot strength to sort things out with the sisters, and thus, the role of the Christ Child was to reinforce communal values.

Most apparitions, however, had no connection to community integration.

Once, a marvellously beautiful infant prevented Guyot physically from attending mass with her fellow sisters. The child, supporting her by one hand and holding the other on her heart, expressed that they wanted to hold her a private mass, “[a]nd thereby the adorable child having changed form had celebrated the mass [...]”⁶⁸ What is meant by the child changing form is not clear: did the child become an adult, a priest, or something completely different, perhaps not a human manifestation at all?

Another aspect in Guyot’s experiences of the Christ Child as part of her individual spiritual perfection is the use of this manifestation in bridal mysticism. In several passages, the child is the erotic spouse. Little scholarship exists on this fusion of roles, and it has never been approached from a queer theoretical perspective.⁶⁹ The most important incidence is found in the chapter on the effects of the Blessed Sacrament which, on the feast day of saint Catherine of Siena (1347–1380, canonized 1461), caused a major rapture in Guyot. She explained that during communion she had seen in the Host a small child⁷⁰ of incomparable beauty smiling at her. She found herself right away in an admirable place, where

*saint Catherine of Siena, accompanied by a great number of Virgins, was paying great tribute to Jesus. Our Lord, reciprocally, gave special caresses to the saint and, when Etiennette asked to participate [in the caresses] replied, “Give me your heart.” After this, the divine Saviour appeared in front of her exposing their five wounds. From each wound came out a sun, and as she looked at them, the rays radiated on her and imprinted onto her extreme pains in the feet, hands, and side. She would not have been able to endure these pains without particular help from God.*⁷¹

In our reading of Guyot’s vision, an important aspect is that the beautiful child seen in the Host was the same manifestation of Jesus that interacted with saint Catherine, making Jesus a spouse in the form of a child. As a child, they caressed saint Catherine; Guyot, too, wanted her share of the child’s affection.

This vision was not atypical as juvenile spiritual marriage is present in other passages related to the effects of the Eucharist on Guyot. Once, the child appeared to her again in the Host. Quivering in excitement and as if wanting to embrace her, the infant uttered: “My spouse, come to me, please.”⁷² A later chapter, on the sufferings of her body and soul, relates that in one of her visions the Infant Jesus, “amid a thousand loving caresses,” said to Guyot that they would make her resemble Job in suffering. After this, Guyot felt her ordinary torments double, and she received new afflictions.⁷³

Scholars of both textual and visual representations of the Christ Child have noted the recurring theme of the Proleptic Passion, meaning that aspects of Christ’s death and torture are present in scenes of their infancy, forming a dialogue of opposites.⁷⁴ This is the case in Guyot’s vision with saint Catherine, where Jesus is simultaneously the child and the crucified adult with their wounds. In our reading, the Christ Child as spouse also incorporates other conflations of opposites: they are a child and have a role normatively attributed to an adult, that of a spouse. Furthermore, they are an innocent and sweet child, but also an authoritative, harsh spouse. From a queer theoretical viewpoint, this is a disturbing representation: a child as a lover to a young woman, implying paedophilia with violence as a leading trait.

The violent character of Jesus as a spouse, or *love noir*, and the related love and gender role reversal, has been identified in medieval scholarship.⁷⁵ The tradition of *love noir* was alive in seventeenth-century France and in the Ursuline Order, with a twist we identify as paedophilic. When compared to early Christian writings, a link exists at least with the Acts of John, where Jesus appears in the form of a child, changes size, and hurts John by pulling his beard.⁷⁶ Thus, the queer reversal of love conventions, including age roles, were at least partly backed up by the extra-canonical tradition, which helps to explain its widespread nature and acceptance as devotional reading.

JESUS AS A VOICE AND LIGHT

Other manifestations of Jesus in the obituary notice of Etiennette Guyot include light and voice. They appear less frequently than the Christ Child and are connected mostly to the early stages of her spiritual journey, but are no less important.

Jesus as light was touched upon above, related to Guyot's vision on the feast day of Catherine of Siena. When Guyot asked to participate in the scene with Jesus caressing Catherine, Jesus responded by showing her their five wounds with a sun coming out of each wound.⁷⁷ The metaphor of Jesus as the sun was promoted in Guyot's time especially by Pierre de Bérulle who incorporated Copernican ideas into his theology in a way that could be described as divine heliocentrism.⁷⁸ The idea of Jesus as light is found in both canonical and extra-canonical writings, such as the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Thomas,⁷⁹ and the Acts of John discussed above.

The aggressive nature of the Christ Sun in Guyot's vision is peculiar. Jesus is an aggressive agent who shoots out fiery suns from their wounds, causing Guyot to receive painful stigmata. The facility to dispatch harming rays of light makes the body of Jesus curiously queer. It is a human body, but also a body equipped with supernatural armament. Moreover, Jesus again used *noir* love language, and instead of caressing Guyot as they did Catherine, they caused her great pains with burning rays of sunlight. This representation is in rigid opposition at least with our general understanding of Jesus as pacifist asking to turn the other cheek.

The first incidence of Jesus as voice is related to the difficulties Guyot encountered with her community that initially rejected her novitiate. In her agony, she turned to the Virgin Mary, praying under her image. Suddenly she heard the voice of the Virgin appealing to Jesus to have pity on Guyot. Then another voice, "like that of a small child," replied and promised to protect her.⁸⁰ Guyot understood that she had been accepted as a novice. Here again the Infant Jesus, now in the form of a voice, acts as a comforting figure in a situation defining her adaptation to communal life in the convent.

Another appearance of Jesus as voice includes an invisible but physical sensation of their hand and occurred about half a year after Guyot had become a fully professed nun, during Holy Week. In prayer she asked Jesus for some of their pains, and "[a]fter that, the hand of a man weighed on her head" in a way that made her neck and whole body bend. "Then a voice said to her: 'I am the one who has suffered for you. To show that I have touched you, you will have a headache that will last until death.'"⁸¹ After this, she felt the hand disappear but at the same time she received an extreme headache.

The passage on the invisible hand is linked to *Imitatio Christi*, or the spiritual practice of following the example of Jesus, and bridal mysticism, as Jesus is again using violent love language to show affection to their bride. Manifestation of the Heavenly Spouse as a voice in an early stage of Guyot's mysticism as a fully professed nun could be interpreted as a lesser material manifestation; Jesus appears more material as she grows in her spirituality.

GUYOT'S JESUS AND GENDER

In the obituary notice of Etiennette Guyot, Jesus' polymorphism evades binary interpretations of gender in favour of genderqueer readings, where Jesus is a man but also signifies as neither masculine nor feminine.

Masculine attributes are attached to Jesus in their form as a child; they are referred to with the pronoun "il," he, as can be seen in the cited passages describing the Christ Child as growing in size and as a quivering spouse. We do not see any ambiguity in the use of the pronoun. In the other instances, where gender is not indicated, it is a question of phrase structures and grammar that do not require gender-specific pronouns. Nevertheless, the young age of Jesus causes some questions of gender expression. How masculine is a swaddled baby? How does a child express their gender identity? Guyot's Christ Child displays masculine-type behaviour from a seventeenth-century perspective: the child holds a mass, which was only the privilege of men, and acts as a spouse for Guyot at a time when marriage was a heterosexual institution. These are the only clear references to masculinity, leaving the Infant Jesus more of a supernatural being surpassing rigid gender categories.

Another reference to masculinity is found in the second example of Jesus as voice with the associated invisible hand. In a mystical experience during Holy Week in 1646, Guyot is described to have felt the hand of a man weighing on her head. No further explanations are given for it; somehow she just knew the gender of the being moving their hand. Maybe it was due to the powerful effect the hand had, that caused extreme pain, implying in the text an understanding of men as strong. It is interesting that the text chooses to bring up the gender of the owner of the hand so explicitly instead of just reading that Jesus' hand pressed her head.

Genderqueerness is present in Guyot's vision of saint Catherine. What gender is a body that can send out painfully burning rays of light? Mystical visions of Jesus' wounds have been traditionally read as feminizations of the body of Jesus, as Jesus feeds the thirsty mystics with saintly fluids from his wound like a mother.⁸² In Guyot's mysticism, these maternal associations are taken into a violent realm; the motherly figure, the creator of life supposed to protect their loved ones, is also a killing machine with rays shooting out of their wounds. This representation conflates both masculine and feminine traits, creating a body that abandons gender altogether, which is a line of interpretation taken in recent queer studies on medieval religiosity. As Mathilde van Dijk reminds us, God was beyond gender for medieval people, who also considered gender an unstable matter. This was due to the medical understanding of the balance or imbalance of the humours.⁸³

Queer Jesus and Their Significance: Conclusions

Researchers of Jesus' polymorphism have used terminology familiar in queer studies, yet no one before us has argued for the comparability of polymorphism and queerness. In this article, we have shown how Jesus' queerness through their polymorphism is subtly visible as early as the New Testament, and in the extra-canonical Acts of John it reaches even bigger proportions. The theme was developed in seventeenth-century lived religion and in the visions of Etienne Guyot. Her mysticism was born from the vivid religious culture of her time, where canonical and extra-canonical traditions were richly blended. The queerness of Jesus was echoed strongly in her visions.

Despite the chronological disparity, both texts present Jesus in surprisingly like manner. First, Jesus is both an adult and a child. In our analysis, Jesus as a child represented spiritual growth and status. In Guyot's text, the Christ Child is also related to communal values (due to the context of the visions in a monastic community), and, disturbingly, to bridal mysticism with sadist features. Eroticism could also be read into the passage in the Acts of John describing Jesus and John holding each other. Second, Jesus appears both big and small in stature and transforms from a material and solid body to an immaterial being, namely light, voice, and an invisible hand. In this, Jesus (re)forms their identity over and over again, which makes queer fluidity their leading trait. In terms of gender, Jesus expresses masculine traits, but, most importantly, they exhibit genderqueerness.

In the Acts of John, Jesus' polymorphism is a major part of their character and serves to explain the undefined nature of God. In Etienne Guyot's mysticism, queer Jesus served as a means to acquire a voice and status in the male-dominated church. The Catholic Church had a long tradition of women mystics who could circumvent the limitations imposed on their sex. As preaching and priesthood were only for men, interpreting the central concepts of faith through supernatural mystical experiences enabled women to become mediators between the divine and humankind.⁸⁴ Guyot was able to use the subversive power of her visions to convince contemporaries: Her unofficial cult sprung up as soon as she died⁸⁵ and, a couple of decades later, she received an entry in Pommereu's collection as an exemplary nun.

It is important to note that a queer vision of Jesus was at the heart of this female empowerment. From early Christianity at least up to the seventeenth century, the fluid and nonconforming polymorphic central character of Western civilization, Jesus, was a revered figure. As queer people ourselves, we find this long history of the "messy" and unstable understandings of gender – and of existence in general – in Christianity important. It shows that queerness has not always been marginalized, quite the contrary; the Christian spiritual tradition incorporates significant genderqueer elements. This, when properly recognized, will help to counter political extremists and their queerphobic attitudes in today's world.

Notes

- 1 We are grateful for the insightful comments of the anonymous reviewer and the editors (especially Christine Aarflot) of *Tidsskriftet St. Sunniva*. A special thanks also goes to our colleagues at the department of Biblical Studies, University of Helsinki, who have commented on the various drafts of this article. We are especially indebted to Professors Ismo Dunderberg, Martti Nissinen, Jutta Jokiranta and Petri Luomanen as well as doctoral researchers Jarkko Vikman and Antti Vanhoja for their valuable observations. We are likewise grateful for the intellectually stimulating environment of the Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences at Tampere University and especially the Lived Religion Team led by Professor Raisa Toivo. Kate Sotejeff-Wilson has done a great job proofreading the text, but all remaining errors are ours. Thank you, Inessa, for your assistance with footnotes and the bibliography.
- 2 Although the article is a joint effort, the first section is largely based on the expertise of doctoral researcher in biblical studies Moona Kinnunen, and the second section on that of historian, Dr Rose-Marie Peake.
- 3 We use the term “extra-canonical” to refer as neutrally as possible to writings that are not included in the collection known as the New Testament. A synonymous term would be “non-canonical.” We treat the Acts of John similarly to any other early Christian text, canonical or not. On extra-canonical literature see Elliot 1993, Burke 2013; 2020.
- 4 For the definition of lived religion, see e.g. Kuuliala, Peake, and Räisänen-Schröder 2019, 2.
- 5 Sedgwick 1993, 8; Halperin 1995, 62. For the widened definition, we have been inspired by the ideas of Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland, who have argued for a more extensive definition of queer for religious studies with emphasis on transformation. See Seim and Økland 2009. For a critical introduction to queer theory, see Sullivan 2003.
- 6 Czachesz 2012, 117.
- 7 Seim & Økland 2009, 2.
- 8 Seim & Økland 2009, 2–3. One of the most famous examples of a metamorphosis into an animal is Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (also known as the Golden Ass) from the second century CE, in which the protagonist Lucius transforms into an ass, keeping his human mind.
- 9 Czachesz 2012, 121.
- 10 Lalleman 1995, 99.
- 11 Studying the period circa 500–1500 CE.
- 12 For a recapitulation of the scholarly debate on the significance of gender in medieval sainthood, see Kuuliala 2020, 16–19. For queer readings of medieval religiosity and the body of Jesus, see especially Lochrie 1997; Hollywood 2016. For early modern women’s spiritual practices and devotion to the wounded bodily manifestations of Jesus, see Peake 2020, 92–99, 154–158; Covington 2009; Gélis 2005; Albert 1997. For a queer reading of the body of Christ in seventeenth-century religious lyric, see Rambuss 1994; 1998.
- 13 This distinction is made by Jonathan Potter (2015, 193).
- 14 Perhaps the most informative fact is that Jesus’ appearance does not seem to differ from that of other people. Judas had to kiss Jesus before Jesus’ capturers could recognize them (Mark 14:43–45 and parallels).
- 15 Czachesz 2009, 62.
- 16 Pleše explains “For some, multiformity had more to do with different spiritual capacities of recipients than with Christ’s real nature. For others, it proved that Christ was, in fact, without any form and above all determinations. For some, again, polymorphy was the visible expression of Christ’s multiple potencies, virtues, or perfections, in contrast with the unity, simplicity, and ineffability of the transcendent Father. For others, it was the symbol of Christ’s paradoxical status, of his being one with and, at the same time, different from the other members of the

divine triad." Pleše 2006, 32-33. Elusiveness and being uncategorizable are prime examples of queerness.

17 In Ancient Greece and Rome, gods were often depicted in anthropomorphic ways, acting like humans. See more in Sissa and Detienne 2000. Descriptions of Jesus eating could fulfil this kind of motive, or at least it could be one possible model for interpreting Jesus' polymorphic manifestations.

18 There is no record that Thomas actually touched Jesus. Kinlaw 2005, 170.

19 Moss 2019, 39.

20 Jesus' polymorphism is present, for instance, in the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of Peter, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Apocryphon of John. Burke 2013, 82.

21 Rose 2009, 24-25. The Acts of the Apostles is included in the New Testament, and the extra-canonical Acts are based on the New Testament. The five major individual Acts are named after John, Andrew, Paul, Peter, and Thomas.

22 Rose 2009, 32-33.

23 Cameron 1991, 90.

24 Lalleman 1998,

25 Elliot 1993, 229-230.

26 Bovon and Junod 1986, 171.

27 Burke 2013, 81.

28 Cartlidge 1986, 53; Bovon and Junod 1986, 163.

29 Cartlidge 1986, 64-65.

30 Junod and Kaestli 1983, 471. Erik Hornung argues that polymorphism is a relevant characteristic of almost all Egyptian deities: Isis, for example, is described as polymorphic. Nevertheless, the number of forms the deity could adopt is usually limited. Hornung 1973, 114-117.

31 Junod and Kaestli 1983, 472, 483.

32 The Acts of John 88 (henceforth AJohn). Translations of the Acts of John from Elliot 1993.

33 King 2009, 59.

34 King 2009, 62-63.

35 King 2009, 64.

36 AJohn 89. When a boy's beard started to grow, it was a sign of manhood and maturity in ancient Greek and Jewish culture. Potter 2015, 191.

37 Junod and Kaestli 1983, 471, 479.

38 AJohn 89.

39 AJohn 90.

40 Lalleman 1995; Foster 2007.

41 Junod and Kaestli 1983, 481.

42 We, along with other scholars, see this as an allusion to Moses and God on Mount Sinai, where God says to Moses: "then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Ex 33:23).

43 Potter 2015, 199.

44 Junod and Kaestli 1983, 483. Apophatic, or negative, theology is a leading thought behind Junod & Kaestli's interpretation.

45 AJohn 89. This alludes to the Gospel of John (GJohn 13:23), where the Beloved Disciple reclines on Jesus' breast at the last supper. In AJohn, John also leans on Jesus, but in GJohn the beloved disciple is the one reclining on Jesus' breast. The fact that both texts employ the name John in their titles is more of a proof of John's influence in early Christianity than any historical fact about their authorship. See more about the relation between AJohn and GJohn in Lalleman 1998, chapter 3.

46 AJohn 93.

47 For a classic feminist reading of the subject, see Bynum 1982. For a queer critique, see Lochrie 1997; Sexon 2021.

48 Potter 2015, 190, 201.

49 Farmer 2015, 250.

50 AJohn 97.

51 AJohn 98.

52 Lalleman, as well, has ended up with the same conclusions (1995, 187).

53 AJohn 98. Most of the predicates are familiar from the Gospel of John's "I am" sayings.

54 For the use of extra-canonical texts in later history, see e.g. Reed 2015; Bestul 2015, 1-2, 26, 29-30; Burke 2013, especially chapters 2 and 5; Elliott 2008; Brock 2006. The reception history of the extra-canonical texts has attracted most scholarly attention in the context of the Middle Ages, see especially Dzon and Kenney ed. 2012. For the early modern period, see especially Welsh 2017 (also about the Middle Ages); Hessayon 2015.

55 The Ursuline Order was founded in 1535 by the Italian Angela Merici (1474-1540, canonized 1807). The Order spread quickly across France, arriving first to Provence in the late sixteenth century and in Paris in 1608. The convent of Beaune was founded in 1626. For the history of the Order, see Gueudré 1958-1963; Jégou 1981; Mariani s.a.

56 Pommereu 1673, II: 298-328 (PDF: 856-861, 863-887). For the sake of accessibility, we use here the digitalized microfilm found at the University of Alberta Libraries and stored at the Internet Archive. The text is identical with the microfilm found at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: H-4784/slide 1. The Pommereu collection has been used by scholars such as Elizabeth Rapley (1990; 2001), Barbara Diefendorf (2004), Laurence Lux-Sterritt (2005), and Thomas Carr (2007) for wonderful feminist readings of early modern women's spirituality, but it has never been analyzed from a queer theoretical perspective. Important contributions in the field of linguistic studies include Dubois 2018; Dubois & Nady 2017, and Allen 2014, which provide useful information about the production, use, and meaning of obituary notices as a literary genre.

57 Guyot's experiences were also closely screened by both medical and ecclesiastical authorities for signs of illness or demonic possession, but she was declared sane and her mysticism orthodox. Pommereu 1673, II: 316-317.

58 According to the text, Guyot's notice is based on the eyewitness notes of the Mother of the convent. The extraordinary confessor of the convent, Monseigneur Regnault, is also said to have produced two reports on Guyot's virtues a couple of decades after her death. Pommereu 1673, II: 309-310, 327. Unfortunately, no traces of Guyot's or of Regnault's reports can be found at the Ursuline archives in Beaugency nor in departmental and municipal archives.

59 Pommereu 1673, II: 298-305.

60 For a short treatment of this theme in Finnish, see Peake and Rosenberg 2019, 218-230.

61 This is explicitly stated in the text: "Il est à remarquer que Nôtre-Seigneur luy aparoissoit le plus ordinairement sous la forme d'un petit Enfant, l'attirant & l'attachant par ce moyen aux grâces, aux vertus, & aux mysteres de sa sainte Enfance." Pommereu 1673, II: 312.

62 See Dzon 2017; Dzon and Kenney ed. 2012; Areford 2019. For the Italian Renaissance, see Sarnecka 2018.

63 For the cult in general in France, see Noye s.a., and for the significance of the devotion for French women, see La Rocca 2007, 182-185; 2002, 19-26, 29-30, 33-34.

64 Pommereu 1673, II: 301. "se juegant indigne de souffrir de grandes choses comme les Saints, elle avoit resolu de se faire petite, afin d'honorer la petitesse de Jesus." All translations by the author.

65 La Rocca 2007, 182-184; 2002.

66 Kieckhefer 2012.

- 67 Pommereu 1673, ll: 305.
- 68 Pommereu 1673, ll: 312. "Et que de ce fait cét adorable Enfant ayant changé de forme avoit célébré la Messe [...]."
- 69 Sandra La Rocca (2002, 21; 2007, 82-83) mentions a couple of cases of spiritual marriage between the Christ Child and a woman mystic in seventeenth-century France, and a short mention is found in Jacques Marx's article (2005, 1136) on Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement, who was a contemporary of Guyot serving at the Carmelite convent in Beaune. Medievalists such as Richard Kieckhefer (2012, 174) and Mary Dzon (2017, 31, 39-108) have noted the phenomenon, but treat it as flirtation of an inaccessible lover, an allegory, and a rhetorical device of the author, which we find too reductive for our case.
- 70 For the meaning of the Christ Child in the Host in medieval culture, see Marcus 2012; Gertsman 2012; Areford 2019; La Rocca 2007, 107-113.
- 71 Pommereu 1673, ll: 310-311. "sainte Catherine de Sienne, accompagnée de grand nombre de Vierges, luy rendoient de tres-grands honneurs; & que par réciproque Nôtre Seigneur faisoit de singulieres caresses à cette Sainte, desquelles demandant la participation, il luy fut répondu ; Donne-moy ton cœur ; Qu'après ce divin Sauveur s'étoit mis devant elle, luy exposant ses cinq playes dont il sortoit de chacune un Soleil, qu'à mesure qu'elle les regardoit, des rayons dardoient sur elle, qui luy imprimoient d'extrêmes douleurs aux pieds, aux mains & au côté, & qu'elle n'auroit pas été capable d'endurer ces douleurs, sans un secours particulier de Dieu."
- 72 Pommereu 1673, ll: 312. "Venez à moy, vous tous qui estes chargez, & je vous soulageray"; "Que mettant les bras en rond, il se tourna devers elle, & luy dît: Mon Epouse vien à moy je t'en prie. Et que tandis qu'il luy parloit, elle le voyoit tressaillir comme une personne qui passioneroit quelque chose."
- 73 Pommereu 1673, ll: 318-319. "parmy mille amoureuses caresses."
- 74 See Gertsman 2012, 68, 82; Areford 2019, 465-466. see also Dzon 2017, *passim*.
- 75 According to Karma Lochrie, mystical eroticism did not always align with the allegory of the Song of Songs and the tradition of sentimentalizing it in the "place of delights." Women mystics were reversing the convention of courtly love where violent sexual language was usually attributed to men. Lochrie 1997, 182-185. See also Hollywood 2016, 149-169.
- 76 See AJohn 90. For the reception history of the extra-canonical writings on the childhood of Christ in the Middle Ages, see Sheingorn 2012.
- 77 Pommereu 1673, ll: 310-311. For the sun as a symbol for Jesus, see also ll: 311.
- 78 Miquel 2007. God as sun was originally a reformulation of the ancient cult of the sun god. See also McDermott s.a.
- 79 See e.g. Areford 2019, 480.
- 80 Pommereu 1673, ll: 302. "comme celle d'un petit enfant [...]."
- 81 Pommereu 1673, ll: 306. "[a]près, la main d'un homme luy pesa sur la teste"; "Puis une voix luy dît; le suis celuy qui ay souffert pour toy. Pour marque que je t'ay touchée, tu auras une douleur de teste, qui te durera jusqu'à la mort." For another apparition of the invisible hand, see Pommereu 1673, ll: 312.
- 82 See most famously Bynum 1982, and for a critique bringing queer sexuality into the analysis, Lochrie 1997; Rambuss 1998. For a recent genderqueer critique abandoning the binary understanding of gender altogether, see Sexon 2021.
- 83 Dijk 2021, 270-271. See also Sexon 2021.
- 84 See e.g. Salmesvuori 2014; Peake 2020, 74-115. In relation to the seventeenth-century French cult of the Christ Child, Sandra La Rocca has argued that identification with the Infant Jesus and emphasis on powerlessness gave women credibility as true vessels of God admired by contemporaries and even the clergy. See La Rocca 2002.
- 85 Pommereu 1673, ll: 327.

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