Chapter 4

The Transgender Turn

Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back

M. W. Bychowski

Most scholarship is, effectively, cisgender scholarship, not only because it is mostly cisgender scholars who have claimed the education and tools to publish it but also because most scholarship assumes the cisgender status of any character or historical figure who is presented to readers. Some have called this prejudice *cissexism* because it represents the privileging of cisgender perspectives and identities; institutional cissexism, in turn, has made it easier for cisgender scholars to claim and maintain greater academic authority than trans scholars. As a result, the arrival of transgender scholars—especially in fields such as medieval studies—marks a late-arriving turn in the field. Simultaneously, because of the compulsory cisgender assignment of history and historical figures, texts such as Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2[1] from the London Metropolitan Archives, and historical people such as Eleanor Rykener, have already been coded by cisgender norms. As a result, trans readings do not immediately spring to mind as the primary readings, which—if you look critically at this document—is nothing short of astonishing. Nonetheless, cisgender readings of texts and histories have been dominant for so long they are treated as neutral. This can make it difficult for trans readings to enter academic discourse, because transgender studies can be seen as offering modern additions to long-established traditions within cisgender histories and studies. Trans studies is seen as an act of remaking or rewriting history. Neither the text nor the person was

necessarily cisgender until cisgender scribes, scholars, and readers marked them as such. This essay names and interrogates the supposed neutrality of cisgender subject positions and the compulsory cisgender assignment of history and historical figures. Comparable to how trans people are typically assumed to be cisgender at birth and raised to be cisgender by parents, so too do scholars of history compulsively assign cisgender assumptions to people and texts in the past without stopping to seriously consider trans potentials. Thus the transgender turn critiques compulsory cisgender identity assignment and history, as well as opens up discursive possibilities for trans histories to begin to be told on their own terms.

Let's take the case of Eleanor Rykener, a trans woman sex worker whose life story appears only in the London Metropolitan Archives' Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2.[2] Rykener's story, in Latin, runs as follows: along a Cheapside road ("vicum regium de Chepe") in medieval London, a woman who called herself Eleanor ("Elianoram Rykener") stands turned toward the street until a cisgender man[3] named John ("Johannes Britby") observes ("detectus") her womanly self, follows ("assecutus") and accosts ("petens") her, a transgender anomaly in his world, and she turns to him and challenges the look that he gives her. She demands money ("argentum") for her labor before she is willing to consent ("consentiebat") to go with him. Together they retreat to a stall ("stallum") on Soper's Lane ("Sopereslane") to engage in what the record calls an unspeakable ("nephandum") act. They are caught ("capti") by officers ("civitatis ministros") and brought to the mayor's court. There the events of the encounter are confessed and recorded by an unnamed scribe. Eleanor's story was further investigated, including the story of her transition, her work, her clients, and their gifts to her, including a golden ring ("anulum aureum").[4] Thus begins the fourteenth-century story of Rykener and Britby. Their respective turns toward each other generates a sexual and narrative intercourse between masculinity and femininity, cisgender experience (meaning the experience of someone whose gender as a man is not challenged) and transgender experience (meaning that of someone whose gender challenges social assignments and categories). Subsequently both are caught by fourteenth-century officers of the law, by the courts of their day, by the scribe of the Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2, and by waves of subsequent medieval studies scholars.

It took decades of medieval cisgender studies before trans scholars got their turn at the case of Eleanor Rykener. This "transgender turn" in medieval studies came just around the same time that *Time* magazine announced

"The Transgender Tipping Point" (2014).[5] The article suggests that that moment—and only from that moment forward—is when trans people could have a turn at social and legal rights. Being told when it is our "turn," our time, troubles me because it presumes that other turns and other times are not ours. Celebrating that "this time is ours" assumes that what came before and what comes after is not ours. We might call this time before the transgender turn a cisgender era (defined by methodologies of cisgender history and theoretical turns). Such a turn is a moment, not a movement, in which we are allowed to do something; the implication is also that, if we do not act quickly, we will lose our turn. To be effective, however, the "transgender turn" has to mean more than a moment in time. Thus I build on the "transgender turn," evident in the past few years' worth of work in medieval studies. While building on the work of trans, crip, and queer scholars, I contend that the transgender turn is not merely a way to mark and order recent time but a critical movement that has been active since Eleanor Rykener turned tricks on Cheapside.[6]

Turn is a term with overlapping definitions, signifying ordering, orientation, sexuality, and violence. A turn is a way to reorder power as well as reorder the body. A turn is a way to order and reorder one's orientations and perspectives. A turn can signal a period, or the ordering of a series of actions, such as taking turns in a game.[7] Similarly, a turn is used to describe a critical movement within a field, such as the linguistic turn.[8] A turn is also an embodied word. A turn can signify a return or reoccurrence, such as returning to the site of a crime.[9] A turn can signify an orientation or reorientation, such as turning to face the woman or toward the defendant.[10] A turn can also be sexual, such as turning tricks.[11] A turn can be violent or treacherous, such as turning on the sex worker in a stall (*stallum*) or on the courtroom docket.[12] A particular action or use of the word "turn" can combine the multiple meanings of turning. Indeed, the transgender turn occurs concurrently with the cisgender turn or era. The transgender turn is active in the reordering of power and perspective in the medieval archive of and by Eleanor Rykener. Britby turns toward Rykener, but at the same time Rykener turns toward Britby.

The first task is to define "the cisgender turn" as the reifying of cisgender perspectives on the case of Eleanor Rykener: we see this cisgender prerogative showcased most strongly in the accounts of the encounter by John Britby and the scribe. The cisgender turn is marked not only by the predominance of cis scholars and viewpoints but also by compulsory cisgender assignments wherein a historical figure is assumed to be cisgender unless proven

otherwise. Even trans scholars have at times reified the cisgender turn (e.g., compulsory cisgender perspectives and identifications). Alongside the initial cisgender readers of Rykener's body and case (Britby and the scribe), a brief review of the critical scholarship in the several centuries since highlights the pattern of cisgender histories, or "cistories" (the version of history determined according to compulsory cisgender assignment and perspectives), privileging cisgender authorities and models. These cistories default to cis perspectives and reify traditions of accosting (modeled by Britby) and silencing (modeled by the scribe) trans bodies and histories. Silencing takes the form of perpetuating compulsory cisgender assignments for people such as Rykener, naming her as John (a name introduced by cis authorities) rather than as Eleanor (her self-given name).

The second task is to articulate critical moves of the transgender turn via the ways that trans people turn out toward and speak back to cisgender people and cisgender versions of history. By inviting readers to reconsider the case from Eleanor Rykener's point of view, we may reframe the exchange between her and the cisgender man as well as reorient the sympathies of later historians. What if our instinct were to identify first with the trans woman, giving her a primacy that is automatically given to cisgender men? The Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2 records that before Rykener would give consent, she demanded pay for her labor. As we reflect on Rykener's relationship to Britby as it is narrated in the Roll, three words deserve our attention: consent (*consentiebat*), labor (*labore*), and payment (*argentum*). What does it mean for Britby or later historians to engage consensually with trans subjects? What does it mean for Britby or readers to recognize the value of trans bodies and labor? What does it mean for Britby and scholars to compensate trans people and histories?

The third task is to call Eleanor Rykener back to the stand. With a name that suggests the profession of reckoner or accountant, it is time for Rykener to once again live up to her name. Rykener shows us point for point how to speak back to the cisgender turn and compulsory cisgender assignment (1) by affirming her transgender embodiment and power, (2) by reclaiming her name, and (3) by citing her authority as collaborator and coauthor of her story. Moving forward, these lessons may allow for a more ethical engagement with trans lives, historical and present, by inviting scholars to recognize the discursive moves of various transgender turns that have been occurring for centuries. In the name and critical practices of Rykener, the transgender turn calls for a reckoning in medieval studies that will hold compulsory cisgender assignments and histories to account.

The Cisgender Turn

Before we unpack the transgender turn as a critical movement, it helps to review in what ways it does mark a shift in the field, a shift that comes after what can be called the "cisgender turn." To begin, the story of Eleanor Rykener was made famous by David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras in an article titled "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," in *GLQ* (1995),[13] and later in one titled "Ut cum muliere: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London" (1996).[14] In the same year, Karras referenced Rykener in a contribution to the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* titled "Prostitution in Medieval Europe" (1996).[15] Subsequently Carolyn Dinshaw approached Rykener in "Good Vibrations: John/Eleanor, Dame Alys, the Pardoner, and Foucault" in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, as an unspeakably queer "sodomite" and "transvestite" (1999).[16] The focus of the piece emphasizes the question of sodomy and queerness, yet Dinshaw's reference to transness does lay groundwork for an overlap in the identification and study of Eleanor across multiple categories at once.

Some years later, Jeremy Goldberg made the claim in "John Rykener, Richard II, and the Governance of London" (2014) that "Eleanor" (*qua* Eleanor) did not exist or at least that this specific event did not happen.[17] While admitting that a John Rykener existed in London, Goldberg contends that the Rykener who exists in the record is the literary representation of the falseness of an individual and the moral decay of truth in London: "He [Rykener] is unmanly. Indeed he even wears a dress and performs women's work. Though he engages in heterosexual sex 'as a man,' he also has sex with men 'as a woman,' having been taught by one Anne, who may herself now be dead. He lacks all honesty or trustworthiness."[18] To launch his argument about the falsity of the person and the fictionality of the text, Goldberg writes, "Neither transvestism nor buggery were matters that are otherwise documented in English secular courts and the mayor's court of London would not have been considered competent to exercise jurisdiction at least in respect of sodomy" and observes, "There is no record of a verdict or of punishment."[19] While other scholars have noted how unusual the case is for the secular court and record, most scholars (as Goldberg reminds readers) do not consider unusualness or non-normativity evidence of the impossibility of Rykener's existence and transness (broadly defined). Breaking from the consensus surrounding the case's plausibility, Goldberg represents the unusualness of Rykner (as a person) and the case (as a text) as evidence supporting an interpretation of both the person and text of Rykener as

based in falsity—problematically echoing transphobic accusations and language that have been used for generations to discredit the legitimacy of trans people and trans history. Repeatedly deadnaming (using a name given by parents or society but rejected by the person it putatively describes) Eleanor as "John," Goldberg refers to the narrative of a man committing "gay sex" and "homosexual" acts with men and "heterosexual" acts with women. Rykener is described by Goldberg as "a man in a woman's dress."[20] This again echoes the same transphobic summary that medieval scholars recently used (almost word for word) to describe myself and another trans person to organizers of the New Chaucer Society meeting in 2018.[21] His initial reading of Rykener is as a cheater and a liar, echoing many transphobic descriptions commonly assigned to transgender people.[22] This line of interpretation of cross-dressing and inauthentic gender leads to an argument about the Rykener case as inauthentic history, a joke cross-dressing itself as historical record. Speculating that the story was just a farcical tale of "political pornographic rhetoric" that writers invented to amuse and berate one another, using sex and sexuality to comment on the state of the kingdom and the king,[23] Goldberg writes:

> I wish now to make an imaginative leap—one that no doubt not all will find convincing—and consider the Rykener narrative as political satire and what early modern scholars have dubbed 'political pornography.' . . . The text, as a fiction, necessarily incorporates contemporary understandings of the sex trade that are surely rooted in informed knowledge of late fourteenth-century London. . . . This then is a text fabricated by the Latin-literate clerks who serviced the mayor's court, who had access to and were versed in the diplomatic of the Plea and Memoranda rolls, and would have been unusually well informed in current events and the affairs of the city.[24]

Certainly Goldberg acknowledges that his speculation will not find universal agreement. Indeed, his argument about the fictionality of the text is presented as "an imaginative leap." Yet the degree to which this speculation about the falsehood of the text is connected by Goldberg to the inauthenticity and falsehood inherent in Rykener—who is consistently described by him as a cross-dressing man who engages in gay sex—echoes a wider pattern of undermining the legitimacy and veracity of transgender people in the medieval past and today. While Goldberg's argument is distinct in important ways from the other scholarship mentioned, his article signals (one might say "dog-whistles") many problematic patterns in cis scholarship about Rykener

that associates the idea of a medieval trans woman with the impossible, the unspeakable, and the unrealistic.

To best respond to these transphobic patterns of scholarship, it is critical to first be able to name and identify these patterns as symptomatic of generations of the cisgender turn's preeminence in academia. This preeminence has led to the assumption that cisgender perspectives and jokes about trans figures are normal or neutral. The work of naming the cisgender turn as a long-established historical force is thus an extension of the wider work accomplished by naming "cisgender" as an experience. By identifying nontransgender people as cisgender, trans people and trans studies contend that cis people should not and cannot claim a compulsory or universal viewpoint. The irony is that to many cisgender individuals the word "cisgender" may sound like a new thing and yet describes a very old, widespread norm. Yet words are often coined some time after the patterns or traits they describe have existed. That is why, despite the prominence of arguments by Michel Foucault that "the homosexual" (the noun, as opposed to the adjective) came into being in modernity, I would contend that the development of language is only one way to mark moments and movements that predate the subjugated claiming their subjectivity. Homosexuals have been turning toward, looking at, and gazing upon one another and heterosexuals long before they were called homosexual and heterosexual. Likewise, trans people were labeled thus by cis people before so-called transvestites and transsexuals had the language to mark their experience of difference. Compulsory cisgender assignment has likewise operated to make cis identification not just neutral but necessary, much in the way that Adrienne Rich argues that compulsory heterosexuality is the pre-determinate identity and training of all individuals.[25] One critical contribution of the transgender turn is even simply to identify that the cisgender turn has existed for some time, and to critique its traditions. It is a truth experienced by trans people today, and, I will argue, by Eleanor Rykener, that cis people often do not know how they are looking, staring, or taxonomically gazing at us until we turn our gaze back on them. It would be a mistake to assume that the cisgender turn did not exist until trans scholars named it and that our silence until that point excuses the many histories of cis people accosting trans people. Indeed, the fear of transphobic rhetoric and other forms of accosting helps to explain why scholars (and even transgender scholars) for so long have been unspeaking and untrans-ing transgender.

To understand how cisgender subjectivities have turned on trans bodies since the Middle Ages, we may continue to consider the Plea and Memoranda

Roll A34, m.2 as a document that reflects and reifies the cisgender turns of John Britby. On December 11, 1394, John Britby (Johannes Britby) claims to have been walking down Cheapside between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m., where and when he turned on and accosted (*petere*) a local person, Eleanor Rykener.[26] He (Britby) affirms that she (Rykener) presented as a woman and indeed affirms that he considered her a woman. Britby solicited Rykener for sex. He paid her, and they went to a stall in Soper's Lane (Sopereslane) to complete the transaction. Soon after, they were both accosted by local law enforcement, then brought to court.[27] There, Britby told his story for the scribe. This is the narrative that would effectively become the story of Eleanor Rykener, and it is told first from John Britby's perspective. Importantly, Britby's actions and story both come before Rykener's turn in response. He is the one to pursue and accost her before she can turn toward him or even turn back toward herself to set limits and costs for her body. It is also important to recognize that, narratively, before Rykener is allowed to tell her own history, the cisgender man was able to speak.

The first interaction between Britby and Rykener is the man's "accosting" of the trans woman. In Latin, the word describing Britby's actions is *petens*.[28] This is an adjective form of the word *pĕto*, *petere*, or *petitus*, meaning "to attack, to aim at, to desire, to beg, to entreat, to ask (for), to reach towards."[29] According to Britby's story, it was the cisgender man who turned first, setting the rest of the events into motion. He sees her. He approaches her. He talks to her. He offers money. He brings her to a private place. He reaches toward her body in ways not disclosed. He is then the first person allowed to speak in the courtroom.

How, then, may this cisgender man's turn on the medieval trans woman be qualified? If we are to take Britby's account seriously, his cisgender turn here takes the form of accosting. Unpacking the adjective *petens* and its active forms demonstrates the way that cisgender turns can take the form of the approach, the act of reaching out toward, or the act of attacking or even begging. There is a slippage between the interpretation of accosting that comes into play in present-day debates over sexual assault and rape culture, where one party may view the encounter as a mere approach or request while the other party may view the encounter as an assault or attack. Certainly, asymmetric power relationships between employers and/or employees, compounded by age, gender, sexuality, and racial identity, can further split the interpretation of events. Given a power differential between a cis man and a trans woman, the potential for *petere* to mean "to attack" is worth considering as well. The cisgender subject incites discussion with his question to the trans person (i.e., Rykener): Who are you (in

relation) to me? As a result of his narration of the encounter, this cis man is the one who sets the terms and premises of the exchange with the trans person. Britby is the one who seeks out Rykener.[30] It is also true that later generations might never have known the story of a medieval trans woman without a medieval cis man seeking her out. Britby's actions are defined by this, *petens*, and his desire. Even if the cis man approached her with all due respect and politeness, the exchange he proposes between them underlines that he has power that she does not have. He gets to be the desiring subject, empowered to act first on Cheapside and to speak first in the Plea and Memoranda Roll.

Speaking first in a courtroom or the academy can establish trends in how events are interpreted. For instance, scholars have described Rykener's gender in various ways in part because of their different critical investments in Rykener's sexuality. Dinshaw repeatedly refers to the presence of the "John" element of Eleanor's story—despite the fact that the equal billing of genders espoused by calling her "John/Eleanor" has become the standard among scholars for naming her—emphasizing the sodomy claims in her queer reading of the case.[31] Yet Alexander Baldassano argues that Britby emphasizes Eleanor's female identity in order to undermine such claims, staving off the accusation that Britby had committed sodomy.[32] Reading these scholarly debates in the age of social media reminds us that this issue is still very much alive; consider, for example, the transphobic and homophobic online trend in which (mostly young straight male) Internet personalities debate whether or not engaging in sexual activity with a trans women makes them gay. Academic and online debate evidence the way that a person's perceived gender influences whether sexual encounters are considered sodomitical, gay, or queer.

Indeed, online commentators are protected somewhat from scrutiny for transphobic comments by the anonymity of screen names or pseudonyms, much as the scribe of the Rykener case can fade into the background despite how much influence he has over the narration of events. On December 11, 1394, the scribe of the Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2 observed and transcribed the interrogation of Eleanor Rykener and John Britby, who stood accused of engaging in the unspeakable vice *nephandum*, sodomy.[33] Unlike Britby in his brief turn toward Rykener, the scribe maintains a longer gaze and records multiple turns in her story. Considering the scribe's examination of Rykener more deeply reveals ways in which he is not simply recording a neutral, ungendered history. Whether or not the scribe is cisgender, his text adheres to cisgender presumptions, such as reinforcing the compulsory cisgender assignment of Rykener. The trans woman calls herself Eleanor,

but the cis scribe calls her John. Following the scribe's appellation, generations of scholars call her John too, illustrating how the word of a cis scribe is taken more seriously than that of a medieval trans woman. Cisgender assessments of history (such as calling Eleanor "John") are usually more likely to be accepted as neutral history. The lack of a byline or other identifier for the scribe leaves readers to infer his existence from the document he produced, further illustrating how cis perspectives are rendered "invisible" or transparent (in the sense that they are not seen as a frame, a choice, a methodology) or assumed to be neutral.

Even though medieval scribes and modern scholars have plenty to say on the issue, there are centuries-old traditions in cistory that mark medieval sodomy and people operating within non-normative sexual identities (e.g., those labeled as sodomites) as unspeakable, what the scribe calls *nephandum*. *Nephandum* comes from *infandus, infanda, infandum*, meaning "abominable, monstrous" and "unspeakable, unutterable."[34] Ironically, both premodern writers and modern scholars have made medieval transgender identity unutterable by speaking of potential trans subjects almost exclusively under the terms of sodomy and queer identity. Consequently, even for scholars such as Dinshaw who note (however briefly) that a figure such as Rykener may be considered a "transvestite," this potential identification with transness and womanhood are sidelined to make room for an argument about queerness and sodomites.[35] It may be speculated that as Eleanor as a (trans) woman becomes more visible, then the (cross-dressing) gay-like figure of John becomes less visible, and thus the claims about queer sodomy become more complicated. Of course, medieval sodomy and modern queer identity are expansive enough to include trans erotics; the particulars of transgender sex and sexuality, however, would add another level of complexity to such arguments. In short, scholars such as Dinshaw may sideline Eleanor in order to tell a more cisgender-friendly history of a queer sodomite. In 1999, telling the story of a queer male cross-dresser is unspeakable enough within academic discourse without working to give voice to a trans woman. This may also have been the case for the medieval scribe who told the story of "John" the cross-dressing male sex worker in place of the trans woman who called herself Eleanor. And indeed, the scribe participates in un-trans-ing or unspeaking Rykener. Although she introduces herself into the record as Eleanor ("Elianoram"), the scribe choses to name her as John ("Johannes") twenty-five times.[36] The scribe may be compelled to do so by social norms yet still insists on using a deadname. This alone points to how cistory distorts facts to bring them in line with compulsory cisgender assignment. Cisgender history is not neutral but comes into

being as much through what it excludes as what it includes; cistory insists on an un-transing of history.

In line with the cisgender turn, subsequent scholars generally follow the conventions of the scribe, renaming Rykener "John" despite her recorded act of self-naming. Boyd and Karras open their article on a "male transvestite" by referring to Rykener as "John."[37] Dinshaw opens her article telling the story of Eleanor but moves to using "John/Eleanor," creating an equivalence between the names.[38] Later, when revisiting Rykner in the wake of trans studies, Karras again refers to "John/Eleanor" when creating a collaborative piece with Tom Linkinen which nonetheless explores Rykener as a transgender or at least "transgender-like" figure.[39] Jeremy Goldberg, by contrast, simply calls Rykener "John" in his article, dismissing Eleanor as part of the case's compounded falsity and fictionality.[40] The insistence on using the name "John," over or alongside "Eleanor," suggests that cistory prefers to follow the patterns laid down by cis authorities rather than those offered by trans subjects. This compulsory cisgender assignment not only affects Rykener scholarship but also reveals the cisgender narration of history to be highly constructed and definitively not neutral. Only by denaturalizing the cisgender turn can we retrain our understanding, practices, and sympathies to include the critical revelations of the transgender turn.

The Transgender Turn

In recent years, Eleanor Rykener's case has begun to be revaluated as a result of the arrival of the transgender turn to medieval studies. In the 2014 novel *A Burnable Book*, Bruce Holsinger reimagined Rykener as a "swerver," a term he invented as ersatz medieval vernacular that locates Rykener somewhere between a gender-fluid person and a trans woman in transition.[41] The Plea and Memoranda Roll became an important part of the plot, outshining in some ways the significance of Rykener herself in the sequel, *The Invention of Fire* (2016).[42] Around this time Karras recounted in "John/Eleanor Ryekener Revisited" (2016) why she found it necessary to re-turn to Rykener. Karras admits that if she were to rewrite her initial study, she would consider identifying the figure as "transgender" rather than as "transvestite."[43] In the wake of this admission, the article then describes how Karras's coauthor, Tom Linkinen, was inspired by Karras to create a puppet show reimagining Rykener as transgender. Subsequently the two came together to explore if and how one could re-turn to the figure as "transgender-like," informed by recent scholarship in transgender studies.[44] In this same year, at the 2016

convention of the Modern Language Association in Austin, Texas, an out trans scholar, Kadin Henningsen, presented a paper on the need to identify Rykener both as Eleanor and as transgender, not merely as "transgender-like." This paper was later adapted into an article—"Calling [herself] Eleanor"—for "Medieval Trans Feminisms" (2019), a special issue of *Medievalist Feminist Forum*.[45] That essay is important because it refers to Rykener as a trans woman named Eleanor, but also because it emphasizes the role of women's labor as foundational for Eleanor's expressed identity.[46] Each of these studies exemplify how the transgender turn works to re-turn transgender subjectivities to trans bodies and histories; to rename, rearticulate, and remobilize erased modes of trans life and activism.

The work of the transgender turn is not merely to import insights from the present into the past. The long-standing existence of trans people, and centuries of transgender turns, is precisely what makes new interventions and reclamations possible. As part of this movement, this essay also labors not merely to force a premodern trans woman to perform modern tricks, but rather to highlight the critically trans ways that she already turned tricks in the streets, sheets, and courtrooms of medieval London. Resisting Rykener's compulsory cisgender assignment returns us to a Middle Ages that always already was transgender.

In this spirit, Eleanor's actions and discourse can guide our understanding of the transgender turn. It is worth noting that the document contains eighteen instances of Rykener saying something (five instances of "dictus" and thirteen instances of "quod" connected to her), whereas Britby has only two instances of confessing ("fatebatur"). This emphasizes the degree to which the testimony is first and foremost a record produced about and by Rykener. The record states that on December 11, 1394, Eleanor Rykener ("Elianoram Rykener") told the story of how she had been standing on Cheapside between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m., where and when she turned back toward and negotiated with a man, John Britby. According to the record, "Requesting money for [her] labor, Rykener consented" (Qui ab eo argentum pro labore suo petens sibi consentiebat). She was on this day, as she had been on many days previously, presenting as a woman and calling herself Eleanor. She had learned to perform sex work from a woman, Anna. Responding to Britby's accosting, Rykener demanded to be paid before performing sexual acts with him. This exchange was one of a series of such exchanges; Rykener described the fact that she had negotiated sex from men for pay or gifts, such as a golden ring ("anulum aureum"), and from women, including several nuns ("quampluribus monialibus") and many other women ("quampluribus mulieribus"), married and otherwise, seemingly without pay. Finally,

she consented to sex with Britby. She proceeded to a stall in Soper's Lane ("Sopereslane") and completed the transaction for which Britby had accosted and paid her.[47] Soon after, they were caught by local law enforcement, then brought to the court. There, Rykener consented to give the scribe her name—Eleanor—and told her story as Eleanor.

This is the story of Eleanor Rykener from Eleanor Rykener's perspective. This version of the story is important to consider, given the way that the cisgender turn in scholarship has refused or redacted such a trans perspective. In particular, the fact that the record includes Rykener's demand for payment ("argentum") for her labor ("labore") and that this was a prerequisite for consent ("consentiebat") evidences the fact that this trans woman is not a passive body on which cisgender men act. While Britby pursued and accosted her, the mention of Rykener's consent highlights that Rykener was at least somewhat active in the exchange. The sexual encounter is not something a cisgender man does to a trans woman but something the two of them do together. He did not just turn toward her—she also turned toward him, a transgender turn to meet the cisgender turn in a moment of negotiation that proved to be (and should be to us) pivotal. The insistence on payment before Rykener would consent tells readers that the trans woman did not merely submit to the cis man's desires. He may have desired her body, but she had desires of her own: silver, *argentum*. The cisgender turn toward the transgender subject was going to cost the cisgender subject. The record says that Rykener asked for money for her "labor," signaling that she understood this encounter—that of a cisgender subject with her body—to be a form of work that demands recognition and compensation. Why would we imagine that this same trans woman—who recognized the value of her body, time, and labor—would not also recognize the value of sharing her name ("Elianoram"), her appearance, and the authority of her story with the court?

Eleanor Rykener's Turn

The goal of this transgender turn as I invoke it here is to call Eleanor Rykener back to the stand, to let her speak back to cisgender medieval studies by heeding her demand for consent and payment. Inspired by her demands, I conclude this essay by making three of my own, demanding an overturning of three mistakes of cisgender medieval studies: (1) I demand that we reclaim her body by turning from accosting her gender to affirming the beauty and dignity of her trans identity; (2) I demand that we reclaim her name by turning away from the practice of repeatedly deadnaming her as "John" to a privileging of her self-given identity as Eleanor; and (3) I demand that we

reclaim her story by turning away from an analysis that imagines Rykener as a trans body subjugated to cisgender subjectivities and embracing one that recognizes her narration of events with Britby as a collaboration between trans and cis subjects.

The first step toward developing a more consensual scholarly relation with Rykener may simply be to look at the trans woman in order to glimpse what she showed Britby: that transgender is beautiful. In "The Transgender Look," Jack Halberstam plays with the double meaning of the word *look* to explore how the appearance and gaze of trans people function. Pushing beyond cis assumptions, Halberstam calls readers to see the unexpected beauty of trans lives, arguing, "The transgender character surprises audiences with his/her ability to remain attractive, appealing, and gendered while simultaneously presenting a gender at odds with sex."[48] The transgender turn is thus the power not only to turn heads out of surprise but also to compel second looks that are driven by a response to trans beauty. The disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts it another way: "Beauty is a perceptual process and a transitive action: it catches interest, prompts judgment, encourages scrutiny, creates knowledge."[49]

Although there is no record of how Rykener looked beyond the fact that she appeared to Britby to be a woman, we have evidence that she turned heads. From her confession, we know that Britby was not the first man or woman to turn and give Rykener a second look. Not only did she make them look twice, but also she could hold their look long enough to receive sexual advances, gifts, and payment. To see the beauty of Rykener is to recognize the power of trans bodies to engage actively in the power dynamics of sexual exchanges. Britby objectifies her body; but she expresses her attractiveness and exploits his desire for her. Furthermore, Rykener rejects sexual passivity by demanding to be paid for her collaborative labor. That exchange of money insists that sex is not something that a man simply does to a trans woman but rather is something he might do *with* her, pending her consent. Yet given these particular power dynamics, the sex they have is not a collaboration between equals. The trans woman is being objectified and exploited, yet she demands compensation for that exploitation, reclaims ownership over her body, and demands acknowledgment of her beauty and collaborative labor.

The second step toward cultivating a more consensual scholarly relation with Rykener and her narrative begins by allowing the trans woman at the center of this story to educate us about how to see her better, just as she tried to educate the scribe. How Rykener turns in response to Britby's act

of accosting her and how the scribe unspeaks her story centers on the trans woman's demand for consent, *consentiebat*.[50] This is a modification of the Latin word *consentio*/*consensus*, which means "to assent to, favor, fit, be consistent/in sympathy/in unison with, agree."[51] By demanding that their exchange be premised upon payment and consent, Rykener reclaims some agency over her body and story. Britby may see her, but she turns his head. He approaches her, but she receives him. He asks for sex, but she demands payment. He engages with her sexually, but she consents. He touches her, but she touches him back. He speaks first in the courts, but she gets the final word. Thus, although Rykener insists on pay ("argentum") before she will consent ("consentiebat") only one time in the narrative, her numerous turns of body, agency, and story enact the praxis of visual activism defined by Garland-Thomson wherein staring turns from a one-sided act into an active, consensual collaboration.[52]

Scholars can likewise engage in a more consensual and ethical relationship with Rykener by calling her Eleanor. By repeating "John" throughout the record, the scribe reifies what the court sees and how it allows or fails to allow gender to unfold in time and space. John Britby consents to tell his story in the persona of John Britby. Because this name and identity match his given name and gender—not stated otherwise, because he is cisgender—the scribe and, later, historians affirm the story of John Britby as John Britby's story. Sara Ahmed writes that through repeated affirmations of who may be present, seen, and heard within a particular space, "spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them."[53] Expanding upon this idea, we might also argue that that time, like space, can become cisgender, allowing cis bodies to extend into them. Yet in the face of a cisgender time and place that insist she is "John," Rykener seeks to reclaim her name and educate onlookers by calling herself Eleanor: "Se Elianoram nominans veste muliebri detectus" (Discovered in women's attire, she named herself as "Eleanor").[54] Although the word "transgender" did not yet exist in the fourteenth century, by asserting the truth of her name and person, she lays the foundations for later readers, arriving at her narrative in the wake of the transgender turn, to see her trans womanhood and reclaim her name. The name that Eleanor Rykener gives the court is *Eleanor*. The story she tells is Eleanor's story, mostly concerning her life as Eleanor. The scribe and cistory do not honor the conditions of her agency and self-identification. The scribe and cistory use Eleanor's life story but sideline her from it by calling her "John," or equivocating between "Eleanor" and "John," calling her "John/Eleanor."[55] Even in these cases of "John/Eleanor," the name "Eleanor" comes second.

Yet Rykener did not consent to tell her story as "John" or as "John/Eleanor." She demands, in the record, to tell her story as "Eleanor." The story logged in the court record is the story of Eleanor Rykener, wherein "John" is but a footnote.

Finally, a third step toward creating a more ethical scholarly relation to Rykener is in honoring the sense of obligation she inspires in readers who *are* conscious of her trans subjectivity in the Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m.2. An important response to the labor performed by Eleanor Rykener and by her story can be to mark her as a collaborator and coauthor in the text's construction. Without the class status or cis male identity that would have better enabled her to purchase control over her words, Rykener's story is taken, used, and retold without the author's ever being paid. No payment is mentioned. In fact, although no specific court decision or sentence is noted, Rykener may have been punished for sharing her body, her life, and her words. What can be determined is that throughout the whole proceeding, Rykener was accosted in various forms and her story un-transgendered.

The violation of Rykener's consent and the appropriation of her story may be partially rectified by naming Eleanor Rykener as an author of her text. Critics may reply that Rykener did not physically pen her story and that the Plea and Memoranda Roll recounts a narrative in excess of only her perspective. In some respect, all writing requires a confluence of voices. Nonetheless, without Rykener to provide the particularities of her trans body, story, and name to the proceedings, the account would not exist. Take Eleanor *qua* Eleanor out of the equation and the subsequent histories are not written. For these reasons, I argue that Eleanor Rykener should be listed as an author or coauthor (alongside John Britby, who is also not usually listed, and the unnamed scribe). Only by remunerating Rykener through citation and a byline can the transgender turn establish and commit to a truth that is as important for medieval trans lives as for modern trans lives: if you wish to use trans stories and trans bodies, you should pay trans subjects, or in this case, at the very least offer the credit of authorship over their bodies, names, and stories. Toward the goal of holding scholarship accountable for every Eleanor subject to compulsory cisgender assignment and histories, the transgender turn empowers these trans lives to speak back against the appropriation and erasure of trans subjectivities in medieval cisgender studies. May Rykener, whose very name means "the reckoner," teach us to be accountable to our trans histories. Time and again, Eleanor calls us to return and take another look.

Notes

1. David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," *GLQ* 1.4 (1995): 459–65, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-4-459.

2. London Metropolitan Archives, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2, https://lmaweb.minisisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA_OPAC/web_detail?SESSIONSEARCH&exp=refd CLA/024/01/02/035.

3. The wider goal of this argument is that we would one day pause to consider before automatically assigning a cisgender identity for John Britby. For the purposes of this study, however, John Britby is identified as a cisgender man. There are significant differences between the ways that Britby and Rykener are treated by the document, with the former being given the cisgender (or passing) privilege of not having his gender interrogated, whereas the latter is extensively described in gendered terms, scrutinized for her life history, and deadnamed. Naming these differences between cisgender and transgender historical and literary patterns are important for unpacking critical issues in the past and the ways that stories are told. Regardless of whether Britby is cisgender or not, his story is told as cisgender.

4. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.

5. Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time*, May 29, 2014, http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point.

6. Jack Halberstam (published under "Judith"), *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

7. *OED Online*, s.v. "turn, n. 8c," https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/207668?rskey=vjN61k&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 2019).

8. Ibid., "turn, v. 3b."

9. Ibid., "turn, v. 21a."

10. Ibid., "turn, n. 1a."

11. Ibid., "turn, v.; turn on, 3a."

12. Ibid., "turn, v. 51."

13. Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation."

14. David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, "Ut cum muliere: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99–116.

15. Ruth Mazo Karras, "Prostitution in Medieval Europe," *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed.Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 251.

16. Carolyn Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations: John/Eleanor, Dame Alys, the Pardoner, and Foucault," *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 100–142.

17. Jeremy Goldberg, "John Rykener, Richard II, and the Governance of London," *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s., 45, ed. Alaric Hall (2014): 49–70, https://www.academia.edu/12677622/John_Rykener_Richard_II_and_the_Governance_of_London.

18. Ibid., 69.
19. Ibid., 53.
20. Ibid., 65.
21. M. W. Bychowski and Dorothy Kim, "Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism: An Introduction," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal for the Society of Medieval Feminist Scholarship* 55.1, ed. Dorothy Kim and M. W. Bychowski (2019): 6–41, https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol55/iss1/2/.
22. Goldberg, "John Rykener, Richard II, and the Governance of London," 50.
23 Ibid., 67.
24 Ibid., 66–69.
25. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1985; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).
26. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. *Latdict: Latin Dictionary and Grammar Resource*, ed. Kevin Mahone, s.v. "peto, verb," ed. Kevin Mahoney, http://latin-dictionary.net/definition/30326/peto-petere-petivi-petitus (accessed June 2019).
30. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.
31. Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations."
32. Alexander Baldassano, "Bodies of Resistance: On (Not) Naming Gender in the Medieval West" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2017), 34.
33. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.
34. Mahoney, *Latdict: Latin Dictionary and Grammar Resource*, s.v. "infandus, adj.," http://latin-dictionary.net/definition/23585/infandus-infanda-infandum (accessed November 1, 2018).
35. Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations."
36. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.
37. Boyd and Karras, "Interrogation."
38. Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations," 100–101.
39. Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Ryekener Revisited," in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, ed. Laine E. Dogget and Daniel E. O'Sullivan (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Gallica, 2016), 114.
40. Goldberg, "John Rykener, Richard II, and the Governance of London," 49.
41. Bruce Holsinger, *A Burnable Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).
42. Bruce Holsinger, *The Invention of Fire* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).
43. Karras and Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Ryekener Revisited," 111.
44. Ibid.
45. Kadin Henningsen, "Calling [herself] Eleanor: Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal for the Society of Medieval Feminist Scholarship* 55.1, ed. Dorothy Kim and M. W. Bychowski (2019): 249–66, https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol55/iss1/9/.
46. Henningsen, "Calling [herself] Eleanor," 250.
47. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.
48. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 76.
49. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 187.

50. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.

51. Mahoney, *Latdict*, s.v. "consentio, verb," http://latin-dictionary.net/definition/13306/consentio-consentire-consensi-consensus (accessed November 1, 2018).

52. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 193.

53. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 92.

54. Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, CLA/024/01/02/035, m.2.

55. Boyd and Karras, "'Ut cum muliere,'" 101; Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations," 100–101; Karras and Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Ryekener Revisited," 111.