

# Comitatus

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# *Comitatus*

**A JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES**

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## TRAVELS THROUGH THE DARK REALMS OF MEDIEVAL CLERICAL FANTASIES: SEX AND EROTICA IN THE INFERNAL TESTIMONY

Juliette Bourdier\*

**Abstract:** Medieval testimonies brought back by Christian voyagers into Hell delve into the infernal punishments administered to the souls of the sinners. In this literature, written by monks for monks, the emphasis on sexual deviations is indicative of a constant battle to repress desire, as well as of a need to destroy the object of this desire. The punitive treatment administered to those who violate the rules and allow themselves to be corrupted by lust, elicits a variety of fantasies where torture, cruelty, and lechery are fused together in unbridled poetry. In pursuance of this worship of chastity, bodies, which should be separated and chaste on Earth, are instead mixed together naked and are desecrated in Hell. In condemning eroticism and desire, the monks result in describing a sexuality that is considerably more seditious. This paper analyzes the extent to which this literature allows the study of the attitude monks adopted towards sexual practices.

**Keywords:** sexuality, monastic life, punishments, journeys in Hell, castration, chastity, sexual fantasy, misogyny, sins, monks.

It is no small paradox that of all members of medieval society, the ones perhaps most closely associated with sexuality happen to be its theoretically celibate priests and monks. This is due in part to the rich variety of medieval comic literature in which, from the Old French fabliaux, the Goliard Songs through to Boccaccio's *Decameron*,<sup>1</sup> monks and priests are depicted time and again with virtually insatiable sexual appetites, and tastes that might be deemed uncatholic and indiscriminating, to put it mildly.<sup>2</sup> The pursuit of sexual gratification has thus long been a staple of this social group's portrayals. Yet as lustful and lascivious as they may seem under many an incisive outsider's pen, their own writings present the extreme opposite: in these, they figure as a group of severely repressed individuals whose primary concern was to condemn sexuality in general, and the women who supposedly inspired it in particular. In short, to read medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Among his one hundred and one tales, Boccaccio recounts depictions of adultery, fornications, and diverse sexual behaviors and thoughts that are not uncommon in medieval literature. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, (1349) ed. Pierre Laurens, trad. Giovanni Clerico (Paris 2006).

<sup>2</sup> General ideas are coming from these texts (fabliaux or courtly love among others): sex is natural and uncontainable; religious restrictions are hypocritical; fornication is the sense of life; church trying to control sexual urge is doomed to failure; parents trying to control their children or husband their wives leads to disaster and they deserve to be betrayed. The clergy consist of men and women who have the same urges than lay people.

monastic accounts, the priests—and especially the monks—were but a besieged island of chastity, struggling valiantly to rein in the sinful impulses that unremittingly threatened all souls, religious and lay alike.

The purpose of this short study is not to unlock the secret of monachal lust, nor to define medieval eroticism nor to solve the constructing of genders in the Middle Ages but to investigate the fictionalization of sexual performances in the monachal imagery. In that endeavor, I will visit the sexual representations embedded in “testimonies” of medieval Christian voyagers to Hell and connect their accounts to the traditions of the monastic communities that produced the very testimonies. Showing these connections will facilitate the understanding of monachal conceptualization of erotic desire, sexual sin, and cleansing through punishments.

To acknowledge and reduce the ambivalence of the anachronical term “sexuality” applied to an investigation on medieval perception, I have used an excerpt from the introduction of *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* which chose to refer to Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*.<sup>3</sup>

[Sexuality], indicates the pleasures of the sexual body as they are practiced, imagines, disciplined, and understood. As is well known, there is no medieval equivalent.[...] In this sense, the object of study, medieval sexuality, is a modern construction.<sup>4</sup>

#### SEXUALIZED GENDERS, DESIRE AND REPRESSION

R. Howard Bloch’s work from the 1990s on medieval misogyny and Western love has brought about the recognition—which did not go without thorny controversy—that both the impulse towards sexual desire and that towards sexual repression could in fact be seen as two sides of the same general politics of gender put forth by medieval monastic movements, as well as by other branches of society. From then on, as evidenced in a wide variety of studies, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the medieval construction of gender and of medieval sexualities, with a particular focus on monastic misogyny.<sup>5</sup> Research in this area, however, has tended to neglect one type of work that encompasses a gold mine of sexual representations and of gratuitous sexual cruelty more particularly. These texts are grouped under the generic label of “*témoignage édifiant de voyages chrétiens en*

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *L’histoire de la sexualité* (Paris 1976).

<sup>4</sup> *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz, Medieval Cultures 11 (Minneapolis 1997) ix.

<sup>5</sup> On that matter, see R. Howard Bloch; Frances Ferguson, *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy* (Berkeley 1989).

*Enfer*,” or “edifying testimonies of medieval Christian voyages to Hell.”<sup>6</sup> This genre’s production spans an impressive ten centuries from its inception in the fifth, to its decline in the fifteenth century, with a notable surge over almost two centuries, from the mid-eleventh through the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The present study focuses on texts that have appeared during this prolific period of increased production, during which the genre has seen within its texts the marked growth of overt and strong sexual components. Given the time period during which it flourished, this genre is particularly essential for its contribution to our understanding of the monachal conceptualizations of Purgatory and Hell, since the texts which make it up have evolved in response to variations in economic and urban living conditions as demonstrated by Jacques Le Goff in *La Naissance du purgatoire*.<sup>7</sup> This corpus also has much to say about the changing role of penitence and confession in the Middle Ages, and the associated shift in the view of the relationships between the will, the body and introspection, thus confirming the theory Sarah Kay developed in “The Pardoners body and the disciplining of rhetoric”.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it is not a stretch to infer that the remarkable increase in these documents’ popularity in the wake of the Gregorian Reforms and the imposition of celibacy on the medieval clergy is no accident.

In this paper, I argue that these testimonies offer an under-appreciated and unique window into the monastic responses to the changing sexual, economic, and spiritual politics of the Middle Ages. In the same vein, they reveal a strong focus on corporeal transgression and corporeal punishment which seems at odds with the increasing emphasis placed by the urban mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) on the mental states of contrition, confession, and self-examination. These texts’ philosophical realism and nominalism, just as much as their fetishizing of certain body parts, help make apparent their authors’ effort to construct a phantasmagoric sexuality. However, despite its integration of the imagery of medieval urban culture, this effort ultimately turns out to be a ferocious critique of the systems of value, exchange, and interpretation which dominated that same culture. Through the excessive amount of gratuitous violence practiced on the parts of the body that the church had sexualized one finds in these

<sup>6</sup> In Juliette Bourdier, “Peine et douleurs, la définition sotériologique de l’au-delà,” *TRANS Sorbonne*, 17 (Paris 2014). Subsequently in this study, these texts will be referred to in the shortened form “infernal testimonies.”

<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du purgatoire* (Paris 1981) 1057–1207.

<sup>8</sup> See Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester 1994) 138–159 and *passim*.

accounts can therefore be understood as an implicit expression of the writers' own awareness of the ultimately futile and chimeric quality of the very sexuality their texts attempt to construct.

#### TESTIMONIES OF MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN VOYAGES TO HELL

Around the twelfth century, the geography of Hell was better known than that of Earth. The underworld was then seen as a grim plane of reality that could only be accessed by a chosen few through various forms of divinely supervised journeys. From these supposed visits flowed an astounding body of literature, which I have identified as a cohesive genre comprised of works that feature a regular pattern. Following a weakening of the body—an illness, pseudo or temporary death—the soul manages to escape its fleshly prison to visit the afterworld, guided by a psychopomp. Transformed by the journey's revelation, the soul returns to its body and the new initiate then records his experience or narrates it to a scribe. These texts were frequently entitled "Visions," and in this precise context the term is meant to testify that the traveler has seen with his own eyes. It is thus necessary to avoid interpreting the term "vision" *sensu stricto* with the meaning ascribed to it, say, in our twenty-first century, since in most of this literature, the main character participates tangibly and actively in his journey thanks to the soul's transference within a different, very real and tangible body—albeit one made up of a more subtle substance than that of its earthly vehicle—which is just as susceptible to feeling, bleeding, pain, or to pleasure as the slumbering one the traveler leaves behind.

After having analyzed most of this literature, I noticed diverse orientations in the treatment of the sinner and in that of sin itself in particular regarding sexual behaviors. Numerous medievalists have examined the question of sexuality in medieval literature, and if some few have partly discussed the corpus of infernal testimonies,<sup>9</sup> the presence of sexuality in this genre has yet to receive the attention it so richly deserves.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as this didactic literature spread between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, it evolved to reflect the changing mentalities of the medieval culture itself, its tonality and contents adjusting to fit the priorities of a maturing society under a strong

<sup>9</sup> On texts describing a journey in the afterworld in Latin, see the work of Claude Carozzi, *Le voyage de l'âme dans l'au-delà d'après la littérature latine* (Rome 1994), *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> The comprehensive bibliography offered by Joyce E. Salisbury, *Medieval Sexuality, A Research Guide* (NY 1990), thoroughly indexed with an extensive list of subjects, never mentions the word "hell," nor does it include "punishments," thus demonstrating the absence of attention previous research has paid to my corpus.

clerical influence; the frustrations generated by the attempt to reach pure chastity could, then, "contaminate" a genre of literature monks had full authority over. The fact that canonists were more inclined to legislate on clerics' sexuality than on Hell's reality left a gap in the definition of the netherworld. A new space was therefore available for monks to express and design their own universe, using folkloric images mixed with biblical interpretations to mirror their devotion. Whereas theologians deliberated on technical questions pertaining to the materialization of the infernal space, the corporealization of the body in the hereafter, and the reality of the punishments, monks ruminated on the strictures of the order to which they belonged (most often chastity, obedience, and poverty), which they explored in their own fascinating and uncontrolled fantasy world.

In this short study of medieval sexuality through edifying testimonies of medieval Christian voyages to Hell, I have chosen to focus on chastity, and I will demonstrate that having been inevitably marked by the bias of monastic authority and being, for nearly all of them, authored by men, the Benedictine and Cistercian's infernal testimonies expressed the clerics' yearning for chastity, and therefore the frustrations and desire for revenge against those who had access to sexuality. These premises of their authorship attempt to thoroughly explain why these texts treated sexual sinners with such cruel contempt. Because the evolution of the different facets of these retellings of voyages to Hell mirrored that of the medieval mores, a mimetic effect between earthly society and its corresponding infernal society emerged.

One of this mirror effect's manifestations can be found in the demonization of sexuality and erotica—an attitude present in many monachal texts<sup>11</sup>—but which here takes the form of a plethora of vicious details and of an escalation of perverse cruelties, both intended to exert a deterrent effect on sinners. In fact, it might be useful to precise that the first of these texts, produced from the fifth to the twelfth century, were directly aimed at a religious readership and were exclusively written in Latin. They were meant to educate and to sustain the monks' efforts in embracing their orders' values and in respecting their vows, hence the concern of the texts studied here, produced during a sort of heyday of the infernal testimony that lasted almost two centuries, with issues that were more relevant to clerics than to the lay population.

Some of these texts will never be translated from their original

<sup>11</sup> As in the 1125's chronicle of Williams of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Angloru*, ed. W. Stubbs (Vaduz 1964), or in Nigel de Longchamps' 1190 *Speculum Sultorum*, ed. Mozlay-Raymo (Berkeley 1960).

Latin, and it is noteworthy that the use of the vernacular French in the infernal testimonies, when it begins at the end of the eleventh century, coincides with a gradual decrease in the clerical authorship of these texts whose swan song occurred around 1206 or 1210, with works by Thurchill, Eynsham, and a series of *exempla* by Jacques de Vitry.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it would be possible to surmise that one of the canons put forth in 1215, during Lateran IV, presented, at last, a definition of Hell evolved by Pope Innocent III that was precise enough to put a damper on clerics' creativity in what regarded the nether regions, to the point of bringing their production of phantasmal infernal testimonies to a long-lasting halt. This salient attrition in the clerics' production incidentally went hand in hand with the appropriation of the genre by lay authors after they translated older testimonies in the vernacular languages. As these metamorphosed infernal testimonies progressively gained a widespread appeal with the laity, they spawned a new sub-genre, the *voies et pélerinages allégoriques*, visited by the French poet Rutebeuf (ca. 1250) for example from which Dante's *Divine Comedy* would eventually stem come the fourteenth century.

In an effort to set the Christian scene and define its ontology, I will begin by introducing one of the clerical segments of society, the monasticism, whose members were invested with the power and duty to influence mainstream thinking. Required to be chaste, some used the infernal testimonies as outlets for their own fear of sexual fascination and their ambivalent feelings toward women, who were thought to be responsible for the majority of their sexual depravity. I will then discuss how lust holds a central place in the infernal Cistercian testimonies, especially in those of the twelfth century, and an examination of its extremely vicious portrayal will lead me to argue that punishment alone cannot suffice to justify the relentless plundering of sinners' bodies repeatedly depicted in these pages. Using the first "sex-focused" infernal poem, the ninth century *Vision of Wettin*, as well as the most prevalent texts from the twelfth century<sup>13</sup>—all of which

<sup>12</sup> "Vision Thurkili," Ralph of Coggeshall, PL 182:1074–1119. "Visio Eadmundi monachi de Eynesham," Herbertus Thurston, *Analecta Bollandiana*, S. I. 225.

<sup>13</sup> Chronological list of works comprised in the corpus of this article.

*Vision of Wettin*, Frankish monk (Reichenau 827). Heito, "Libellus de Visione et Obitu Wetini," PL 105. Walafrid Strabo, "Liber de visionibus Wettini," PL 114.

*Vision of Guibert de Nogent's mother* (Benedictine, Clermont, France 1116). Guibert de Nogent, "De vita sua sive monodiarum," Chap XVI, PL 156:837–962.

*Vision of Alberic de Settefrati* (Monte Cassino. Benedictine, Italy 1142). Albericus Casinensis, "Visio Alberici," in *Archivio Della Latinita Italiana del Medioevo*: <http://www.uan.it/alim> (folios 160–207).

*Vision of the State of the Souls* (Benedictine, Liège, Belgium 1142). Joannes Monachus St laurentii, "Visio status animarum post mortem," PL 180:178–186.

originate from Benedictine and Cistercian orders<sup>14</sup>—I will point out two major orientations in these works. These are, on the one hand, a propensity for the desecration of organs that rendered the body disgusting in order to extinguish any sexual desire and erase gender distinctions, and, on the other, a tendency toward unlimited cruelties that generated sadistic pleasure for authors and readers alike through the perversity of the tortures depicted.

#### THE CLERICAL SEGMENT OF SOCIETY: LEADING THE MAINSTREAM THINKING

The Latin infernal testimonies, the fruit of clerical imagination, were first addressed to the monastery's population, which was always in search of perfection. According to Adalbéron de Laon's formulation (1025),<sup>15</sup> early Middle Ages society was divided into three orders: *Oratores*, *Bellatores*, and *Laboratores*. The *Oratores* was made up of the clerical orders whose main occupation was prayer. Benefiting from God's help, they were not only assigned the mission of saving the rest of society, but a certain level of authority was also bestowed upon them which situated their writings in the sphere of the divine.<sup>16</sup> Celibacy was not one of their order's original strictures, but the idea of chastity as purity—a notion exalted by Ambroise de Milan and St Jerome in the fourth century—progressively came to be seen as the only way of

*The revelation of Hell by William the Boy* (Cistercien. Oise, France 1146). Helinandus Frigidi Montis Chronicon, "Revelatione Inferni facta Guillermo Puero," PL 212:1036.

*Vision of Tnugdali* (Benedictine, Regensburg, Scotland 1149). Frater Marcus, "Visio Tnugdali," in Helinandus Frigidi Montis Chronicon, "De raptu animae Tundali et eius visione," PL 212:1038–55.

*Vision of Gunthelm, Cistercian Novice* (Cistercien. Oise, France 1161). Helinandus Frigidi Montis Chronicon, "Novitius Cisterciensis fecit," PL 212:1036–37.

*Vision of St Paul* (Version L4, Benedictin, Fleury, France 1150). "Visio Sancti Pauli Apostoli," PL 94:501–2. (BNF, Manuscript NL, 1631 folio 3–25).

<sup>14</sup> Benedictines and Cistercians are both contemplative orders, which primarily focus on inward conversion in order to grow in union with the Christ for the love of God and the salvation of souls. Their priorities are Chastity, Humility, Obedience, and Asceticism. Since the Benedictines were the first collective order and the Cistercians branched out from the Benedictine order during the eleventh century to seek a more literal application of the Benedictine rule, one can expect their writing to be especially sensitive to the sin of the flesh. Their sexuality is based on the continence of their urges with the expectation of their eventual total disappearance.

<sup>15</sup> Adalbéron de Laon, "Adalberonis Carmen ad Robertum regem," PL 141.

<sup>16</sup> "The development of the Christian religious life in and after the fourth century sanctified a rejection of ordinary social relationships [...] however; there was not total unanimity about how the seeker after God should live. Should it be in a community of the like-minded or in genuine solitude [...] the evolving forms of the monastic and eremitical lives reflect differing positions." Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London 2007) 214.

becoming worthy of attaining God.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the authors of infernal testimonies constantly manipulated the concepts of purity and filth that gravitate around sexuality.

To give an example, one of these authors, Alberic, restates the amalgam between chastity and purity and their corollaries sex and filth in his description of Hell's torments. Referring to a priest who had carnal relations, he states "he that is filthy, let him be filthy still,"<sup>18</sup> and when he mentions cleansing the sexual sins of the clerics whose status made their soul partially of gold, he claims that they will have to cook until the "filth is evacuated."<sup>19</sup>

The idea of clerics' celibacy had been gaining credence in Spain. Eventually it became a requirement, and in the ninth century local councils between Eastern France and Western Germany gradually banned cohabitation between clerics and their wives, even for those who practiced sexual continence within their marital union. Echoing these new measures, Walahfrid of Reichenau, in the *Vision de Wettin* (827),<sup>20</sup> describes the journey in the afterworld of a monk who brings back a testimony intended for human eschatology.

While one would expect the testimony to be primarily concerned with topics relating to man's salvation or to the hereafter, the lion's share of its pages is in fact unexpectedly devoted to the then burning question of sexual deviance among the clergy, as the work's table of contents evidences.<sup>21</sup> In Chapter VI, *Quemadmodum ab angelo ductus*

<sup>17</sup> "Chastity was one of the three central vows but was difficult both to observe and enforce, particularly as it meant controlling one's thoughts as well as deeds. It was a continual struggle for the brethren to exert mastery over their desires [...]. A number of measures were implemented [...]. These included the use of cold baths to quench their lust and the prohibition of meat, since eating was thought to inflame desire. [...] As a further precaution, any monk who sinned by touching or being touched by another was warned to confess this only to God or a priest, lest a weaker member of the community would be shocked or perhaps excited." Julie Kerr, *Life in the Medieval Cloister* (New York 2009) 139.

<sup>18</sup> "Et ita impletur illud, quod scriptum est: et qui in sordibus est, sordescat adhuc." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, Archivio Della Latinita Italiana del Medioevo (ALIM), 174.

<sup>19</sup> "Aurum namque dum purgatur, si aliquid stagni, plumbi, eris seu cuiuslibet rei immistum habuerit, tandiu coquitur, usquequo sordidatio illa evacuetur..." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 180.

<sup>20</sup> Hettonis, "Libellus de Visione et Obitu Wettini," PL 105:771-780.

<sup>21</sup> "I. Quomodo coeperit infirmari. II. Prima visio, in qua terrorem malignorum spirituum vidit, qui consolatione sanctorum virorum fugatus est. III. Adventus angeli purpurati et allocutio eius amicabile. IV. Quo studio fratribus advocatis ad precem et lectionem confugerit. V. Qualiter postmodum ipse ei angelus in albis apparuerit laudans studium eius. VI. Quemadmodum ab angelo ductus ad montana fluvium igneum et diversorum viderit poenas. VII. De misera sacerdotum conversatione. VIII. De quorundam purgatione monachorum. IX. De quodam monacho propter opus peculiare

*ad montana fluvium igneum et diversorum viderit poenas*, just as their visit to the *locus* of punishments begins, Wettin and his psychopomp witness a group of clerics partially immersed in a river of fire: they are tied to posts and tortured in various ways. Facing them are the women they have defiled, also immersed up to their sexual parts in the river of fire, and being beaten upon their genitals with rods.<sup>22</sup> Wettin recognized some of them from his earthly life. His subsequent chapter is thus entirely devoted to the licentious priests who squandered their time with prostitutes, specifying that they would be eternally punished.<sup>23</sup>

This leaning toward clerical chastity was also eventually taken up by the occidental Church, and became more pronounced at the time of the Gregorian Reform,<sup>24</sup> a movement focused on simony and sexual incontinence in the clergy that aimed to ban any promiscuity with

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arca plumbea incluso. X. De Waldone m abbate in purgatione laborante. XI. De Carolo imperatore. XII. De muneribus comitum. XIII. De miserabili vita comitum. XIII. De gloria et poena multorum. XV. Visio throni et gloriae domini. XVI. Ubi crastinus eius transitus ab angelo denuntiatur et pro ipso sacerdotes precantur. XVII. Intercessio martyrum. XVIII. Virginum postulatio pro longiturna a vita. XIX. Sermo angeli de scelere sodomitico et concubinis. XX. Ammonitio angeli de ipsius emendatione et de suo ministerio. XXI. Quae ammonitione digna sint in coenobis monachorum. XXII. Quae sunt abusiva in congregationibus feminarum. XXIII. Ubi apostolica constitutio observetur. XXIV. Item de vitio pessimo. XXV. Cur pestilentia deseviret. XXVI. De studio officiorum ecclesiae. XXVII. De Gerolto comite. XXVIII. Quomodo convocatis fratribus visa describi fecerit. XXIX. Qualiter abbate adveniente cuncta replicaverit. XXX. Quid toto biduo egerit. XXXI. Quomodo post ordinatas orationes feliciter migravit ad dominum." Hettonis Visio Wettini, Praefatio in Visionem Wettini, "Capitula de eadem visionem," MGH SS, Poetae Latini aevi Carolini (II).

<sup>22</sup> "Et in ceteris locis innumeris tormentis diversi generis cruciatus aspexerat : in quibus plurimos tam minoris quam maioris ordinis sacerdotes stantes, dorso stipitibus inhaerentes in igne stricte loris ligatos viderat; ipsasque eminas ab eis stupratis simili modo constrictas ante eos, in eodem igne usque ad loca genitalium dimersas. Dictumque est ei ab angelo, quod sine intermissione, uno die tantum intermisso, die tertia semper in locis genitalibus virgis caederentur." Hettonis, *Visio Wettini*, PL 105:774.

<sup>23</sup> "Sacerdotum Animabus lucrandis non invigilant, deliciis affluentes in scorta pro ruunt; et ita evenit, ut nec sibi nec aliis intercessores esse possint. Saeculo enim pestilentia et fame laboranti sua prece succurrere potuissent, si lucrum deo tota virtute conferre voluissent. Et ideo tali remuneratione in fine donantur, quia praecedentibus meritis talia patiuntur." Hettonis, *Visio Wettini*, PL 105:774.

<sup>24</sup> The Gregorian Reform culminated when Pope Benedict VIII restrained simony and incontinence of the clergy. In order to eliminate Nicolaitism, priests were forbidden from marrying and from having mistresses. The Lateran Council (1123), Canon 3, forbade priests and deacons from associating with women, or to live with anyone other than blood relatives. Canon 21 forbade the above-named as well as monks from having concubines or from contracting marriage. Contracts previously established had to be dissolved, and such dissolution was also to be followed by penance. Subsequent to these canons, in 1139, Pope Innocent II voided all marriages inside the church and prescribed that only celibates could become clerics.

women in order to eliminate Nicolaitism. As a final step, in 1123, the first Lateran Council adopted different canons forbidding any member of the clergy to associate with women, and prescribing the dissolution, followed by penance, of any preexisting union.<sup>25</sup>

It was in this context that the twelfth-century renewal of the infernal testimony took a departure from the *Imperial Visions*, yet another type of testimony, and from the traditions of the two previous centuries.<sup>26</sup> It redirected its focus on an issue that seems to have gained prominence at that time, that is the extension of monastic values to the entire population through the use of the three pillars of monasticism, among which chastity became elevated to the status of a fundamental principle. In Alberic de Monte Cassino's *Vision of Alberic* (1121),<sup>27</sup> after evoking the *locus* of punishments, the author dedicates no less than seven chapters to the glory of monks.<sup>28</sup> St-Pierre declares that by protecting their chastity, monks were equal to martyrs and would therefore be

<sup>25</sup> "The secular clergy suffered from a more fragile gender identity than that of monastic clergy, due to the relatively late acquisition of clerical masculinity and the existence of more alternatives. The celibacy of the clergy was meant to elevate them in status and separate them from the laity. Enforcement of clerical manhood should have been easier among the monastic clergy, yet many gendered conflicts arose within this vocation as well, especially as the era of child oblation died away, and men joined monastic communities as adults, carrying with them their ingrained notions of secular masculinity...." 5. "Recognizing the compelling roles of medieval men [...] church authorities created spiritual equivalent for the clergy encouraging them to be husbands, fathers and warriors of the church...." 6. "Thus the clerical ideal of manliness, created by a reforming Church focused on more than celibacy; it operated in tandem with secular conceptions of manliness." 7. *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux (New York 2010) 5–7.

<sup>26</sup> The Imperial Visions spread during the Carolingian Renaissance from the late eighth century to the early tenth century. Authors like Alcuin, Aethelwulf, Hincmar of Reims, Bernoldus, etc. took part in the renewal of the visions that became, for a century, "politically" oriented. Most of the visions were staged around members of Charlemagne's lineage and pertained to the future of the dynasty. Included among these was the famous *Visio Karoli Crassi*, ordered by Foulques le Venerable, in which Charles the fat, during a visit to Hell, is warned of the coming downfall of his family and of the need to give away his crown for his own salvation. Hariulf, "La visio Karoli Crassi", *Chronique de l'Abbaye de Saint-Riquier*, ed. Ferdinand Lot (Paris 1894) 144–50.

<sup>27</sup> *Epistola Alberici monachi casinensis de visione sua ex miscellan. profanis mss.* p. d. Constantini Caietani in Bibliotheca Alexandrina ad lyceum spaientiae cum versione italica Francisci Cancellieri", 131–207. *Bibliotheca Casinensis* 5, 1 (Casinensis 1894) 191–206.

<sup>28</sup> "XXII. Relatio de beato Benedicto et gloria sanctorum. XXIII. De gloria monachorum et regula eorum eadem Alberico ab apostolo Petro tradita. XXIII. Ut monachi iniurias equanimiter sustineant. XXV. Ut monachi diaboli astutias caveant. XXVI. Ut monachi laborent manibus suis. XXVII. De monachis, qui vitii resistunt, quod similes martiribus sint. XXVIII. Ut monachi dilectionem Dei et proximi ante omnia et super omnia teneant. XXVIII. Ut monachi semper timeant." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 188–96.

permitted to reach the Heavens.<sup>29</sup> He also proclaims that the worst sins on Earth are greed, pride, and lust, the exact opposite of the monk's vows. Henceforth, society was sundered between two orders: the chaste—clergy—and the carnal—laity. Or, in other words, those whose purpose lay in saving humanity, cost what it may, one prayer at a time, and those in need of such salvation.

#### SEX, EROTICA, AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT

By the time of the implementation of Lateran I, in 1123, lust and sex were prominently featured in depictions of Hell, and this can in part be explained by the influence exerted by the genre of the infernal testimony. The sin of the flesh then also became the most violently punished of all, even more so when perpetrated by clerics.

While the clergy struggled to maintain chastity in its ranks, it launched an ineffective crusade against sexuality amidst laypeople. In this context, replete as they were with terrifying *exempla*, the infernal testimonies came to be construed, among others, as a powerful deterrent. The Church tried to dominate most facets of the community's life by marking each stage of human life with a sacrament, from birth and baptism, through to death and the extreme unction. These rites played a major role in leading men towards a favorable disposition in preparation for the Final Judgment, and each of them was intimately linked to sexuality. As a result, tolerance for sexual acts which were not exclusively geared towards fruitful conception grew less in proportion to the sacraments' proliferation.

To give but one example, baptism, which would originally grant Christians their resurrection into eternal life, was being reinterpreted through the changing meaning of the Forbidden Fruit. While the *mālum* originally came from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that grew in the Garden of Eden, in the infernal testimonies, however, it was displaced upon the sin of copulation. By association, Original Sin was thus debased as the thirst for carnal pleasures came to supersede the thirst for knowledge as the high road to humanity's downfall. Since humanity's first parents' dissoluteness degraded their entire lineage, any forbidden sexual interaction was not only considered sinful, but it was also thought that infants issuing from such criminal commerce would suffer terrible repercussions brought about by their parents' sins

<sup>29</sup> "Monachi namque, qui concupiscentie ac vitii resistunt et continentiam de illis habuerint, similes martiribus efficiuntur. Nam sicut martires paganis et infidelibus restiterunt et usque ad sanguinis effusionem ac mortem pro Christo pugnaverunt, sic et monachi adversus diabolum pugnent, contra concupiscentiam decerent usque ad mortem, sordidas cogitationes, libidinem, impudicitiam, amorem divitiarum, ventris ingluviem et reliqua crimina." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 192.



such as being born deformed, mentally handicapped, or afflicted with such unforgiving diseases as leprosy, to name but one.

To the canonists, sexual repression could be seen as the tangible evidence of an advanced stage of civilization. Unsurprisingly, any approach they thought could help liberate society from the hazardous lures of eroticism was thus eagerly embraced. Hence, the Church rigorously hemmed in man's sexual urges by confining their legitimacy to well-defined forms of sexual expression known as *honesta copulatio*. Not content with having determined that sex was to take place exclusively within the bounds of marriage, and, at that, solely for procreation, religious authors also prescribed which days it could be performed on: numerous days were prohibited according to liturgical time or at various stages of maternity. Indeed, sexual deviance prevails amidst human deeds, as stated in Chapter XI of the *Vision of Wettin, De Carolo imperatore*, in which our visionary sees some animal biting *Carolus Imperator's* (Charlemagne's) genitals.<sup>30</sup> Wettin is extremely surprised by the presence in Hell of a man who had always protected the Holy Church and promoted the Faith. His guide explains that even though he had been a man of unquestionable merit, he still needed to pay for his debauchery.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the infernal punishments were intended to deter parishioners from morally debased behavior, *id est* giving in to the desires and pleasures of the flesh.

This does not mean, however, that society meekly accepted Christianity's attempts to gain a stranglehold over its sexuality. Rather, I see the concept of chastity among laymen, buttressed as it may have been by an array of prohibitions and penances, as one of the most amazing and unattainable clerical phantasms yet. Cistercians indeed dreamed of a perfect society that would be entirely based on their order's values and whose members' ultimate aim would mirror theirs: that of becoming as worthy as possible in anticipation of the Final Judgment—which was seen, at that time, as imminent. The fact is that sexuality in the Middle Ages was a fairly approachable subject, as one who peruses this period's amazing body of erotic literature, be it in the

<sup>30</sup> "Illic etiam quendam principem, qui Italiae et populi Romani scepra quon dam rixerat, vidisse se stantem dixerat, et verenda eius cuiusdam animalis morsu lanari, reliquo corpore immuni ab hac lesione manente." Hettonis, *Visio Wettini*, PL 105:775.

<sup>31</sup> "Quamvis multa miranda et laudabilia et deo accepta fecisset, quorum mercede privandus non est, tamen stupri inlecebris resolutus, cum ceteris bonis deo oblati longevitatem vitae suae in hoc terminare voluisset, ut quasi parva obscenitas et concessa fragilitati humanae libertas mole tantorum bonorum obrui et absumi potuisset." Hettonis, *Visio Wettini*, PL 105:775.

*fabliaux* or in the texts pertaining to courtly love, can easily see,<sup>32</sup> and I agree with Albrecht Classen's general take on medieval sexuality, the essence of which can be conveyed by the following statement:

Contrary to common concepts today regarding the attitude toward sexuality in the past, the body in its sexual function was discussed rather openly, both here in our narrative and in numerous contemporary works throughout the entire Middle Ages and the Renaissance [...].<sup>33</sup>

I would venture to add that sexuality was not only "discussed" but also "enacted," as sex was indeed abundantly and unrepentantly practiced and celebrated by the twelfth-century French society, a fact that the present discussion, focused as it is on clerics, might have somewhat overshadowed and neglected. To support this claim I will simply refer to the large quantity of texts issued by the Church which aimed toward the de-eroticization of society. Whether Canons, penitentials (books of penance), sermons, *Exempla*, infernal testimonies or even legal documents, this corpus illustrates colorfully, but also implicitly, the variety of French people's multiple ways of experiencing their sexuality as much as the repeat offenses, or the nature of the fantasies they entertained. In the penitentials more specifically, the enumeration of misdemeanors included an unlimited list of sexual transgressions, performed either within or without the sacred oath of marriage.<sup>34</sup> What was considered as sexual perversion or sins "against nature" was presented along what we would today refer to as sexual crimes. Indeed, the infernal testimonies mimicked the penitentials and showed tortured sinners who committed different levels of sexual sins: teenagers

<sup>32</sup> Among which in French & Anglo-Normand language numerous *fabliaux*, see for example, *Fabliaux érotiques : textes de jongleurs des XIIe et XIIIe Siècles*, ed. Luciano Rossi and Richard Straub (Paris 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Albert Classen, "Sexual Desire and Pornography: Literary Imagination in a Satirical Context. Gender Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Misogyny in "Das Nonnenturmier"" in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Themes, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 3* (New York 2008) 667.

<sup>34</sup> "The doctrine of the penitentials is simple: reproduction is women's principal role and any emission 'extra vas' is strongly condemned especially if it involves oral or anal practices. The essential source of information [...] is in the different penances and [...] they create a false impression of severity," 88. "The entire medical discourse on sexuality tended [...] to show what it was possible to demand from the human being and what it was not. While bringing out the full force behind the idea, of platonic and Galenic inspiration, that the habits of the soul follow the temperament of the body, and while demonstrating [...] that unlike souls, bodies are not equal, medical discourse also condemned slips in behavior that is considered to lie entirely within the responsibility of the subject," 139. Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1988) 88, 139.

overwhelmed by erotic thoughts, married couples who had sex outside of procreation, together with adulterers, prostitutes, sodomites, committers of incest, or rapists.

To steer young ecclesiastics away from these indiscretions, in the early eleventh century canonist Burchard de Worms drew up a manual entitled *Decretum (Collectarium Canonum)*,<sup>35</sup> intended for their instruction and guidance. For more than one hundred years, until the publication of the *Decretum of Gratian*,<sup>36</sup> this practical guide was widely used within the clergy. The XIX<sup>th</sup> book, known as *Corrector Burchardi* or *Corrector, seu medicus*, was recognized as a useful guide for confessors.<sup>37</sup> It delineated any possible sexually inappropriate activity along with the penalty incurred, which priests were required to impose upon the sinner. It also notably inspired the authors of the infernal testimonies, who referred to these texts while enumerating the different types of sinners. The medieval *penitential sex flowchart* progressively built up and generated a decision-making process according to the penances prescribed for each distinctive sexual sin.<sup>38</sup> Not one aspect of the offenses' context was left to the imagination in the confessors' manuals, and with their detailed descriptions, the infernal testimonies were useful as collections of *exempla* meant to emphasize sermons' messages about virtue and vice.

It is essential to analyze the disproportionate relationship between penance and sin as described in the penitentiaries. Earthly punishment mostly revolved around fasting (for laity) and self-flagellation (for clergy) whatever the sin—the duration of the fast or the number of blows being the only variables reflecting the seriousness of the offense.<sup>39</sup> Browsing through the Canons of Theodore, corpus 190, one can clearly discern how sexual sins were handled, and notice the blatant disproportion between the seriousness of the sexual transgressions and

<sup>35</sup> The *Decretum Burchardi* (1005–1010) is comprised of twenty books, among which some are more oriented toward sex and erotica; Book 9, *De virginibus et viduis non velatis* (on virgins and widows who are not veiled), book 17, *De fornicatione* (on fornication) and book 19, *De poenitentia* (on penitence), and is also called *Corrector Burchardi*, which is a penitential or confessor's guide.

<sup>36</sup> The *Decretum Gratiani* or *Concordia discordantium* is a collection of Canon laws compiled and written in the twelfth century as a legal textbook by Gratian. It is part of the *Corpus Juris Canonici* that retained legal force in the Roman Catholic Church until the early twentieth century.

<sup>37</sup> Burchardi Wormaciensis, "Corrector Burchardi," *De Poenitentia*, PL 140:949–1014.

<sup>38</sup> The medieval penitential sex flowcharts are described in detail by James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago 1990) 161.

<sup>39</sup> To these common punishments can be added the penitent pilgrims in irons, carrying chains or tied up with metal bonds over specific parts of their bodies and the punishment for rape which could lead to the death penalty.

the severity of the punishment they bring upon their perpetrators.<sup>40</sup>

Following the same pattern, in *The Vision of Alberic*, an infernal testimony that focuses on sexual crimes, one can find no logic in the way sinners are sentenced for their sexual deviations. Although their sins follow those found in the penitentials, the corresponding degree of pain inflicted often seems inconsistent because offenses which cannot be punished by earthly justice—married couples having sex on holy days for example, or priests and virgins having erotic thoughts—are presented as the most serious ones. Just as in the penitentials, a series of punishments from *The Vision of Alberic* thus reveals the inconsistency that resides in considering with equal seriousness offenses committed by a married couple having sex on Sundays and those of a rapist, all of which will be sentenced alike to purgative punishment to persist until the Last Judgment, and may lead to further eternal penances. The fourth purgative punishment revolves around a red-hot iron ladder standing in a great boiler of melted oil, pitch and resin. Those who were incontinent with their spouses on holy days are doomed to climb that ladder, fall in the boiler, and then climb to fall again, *in perpetuum*.<sup>41</sup> In

<sup>40</sup> The following compilation of short excerpts from the Canons of Theodore, corpus 190, clearly shows how sexual sins were handled: "If anyone fornicates with a virgin, he is to fast for 4 years or 2 to the fullest. Whoever fornicates with another man's wife must fast for 4 years, 2 wandering in grief, 2 (years) more (fasting) during the 40-day periods and 3 days each week. [...] Whoever fornicates with his mother must fast for 15 years and never change that except on Sunday and in holy times; and also he is to journey to foreign lands and fast for 7 years. [...] Whoever fornicates with an effeminate male or with another man [...] must fast for 10 years. [...] whoever fornicates with an animal must fast 15 years and sodomites must fast for 7 years. [...] If he is a boy, for the first time, 2 years; if he does it again, 4 years. If he fornicates interformally (between the limbs), he must fast for 1 year or the 3 40-day periods. If he defiles himself (masturbates), he is to abstain from meat for four days. He who desires to fornicate himself (to masturbate) and is not able to do so, he must fast for 40 days [...]. If he is a boy and does it often, either he is to fast 20 days or one is to whip him. If a woman fornicates she must do penance for 3 years. If she touches herself in the same way, in emulation of fornication, she must repent for 1 year. One penance applies to a widow and a virgin; more (penance) is earned by her who has a husband if she fornicates. [...] Whoever ejaculates seed into the mouth, that is the worst evil. [...] It was judged that they repent this up to the end of their lives." *Canons of Theodore*, Corpus 190 (S) S73.01.01 to 74, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 190, s. XImed, XII; Exeter (Ker 45B, Gneuss 59), in *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: a Cultural Database*, ed. Allen J. Franzen, f. 416–418. <http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/>.

<sup>41</sup> "Post hec vidi scalam ferream trecentorum sexaginta quinque cubitorum longitudinis, ita ardentem et scintillas emittentem acsi ferrum, cum de fornace trahitur. Ad cuius pedes vas quoddam magnum oleo, pice ac resina referum permium bulliens fervebat. Pedes autem per scalam ascendentium et descendentium exurebantur in illis gradibus ignitis et, dum in illud vas ignivomum cecidissent, amplius ardebant.[...] Isti, quos vides ita cruciari, idcirco taliter torquentur, quoniam dominicis diebus vel sanctorum festivitibus atque precipuis ieiuniis a carnali voluptate et a suis uxoriibus se nequaquam refrenare studuerunt." *Albericus Casinensis, Visio Alberici*, ALIM 172.

the third punishment, adulterous women are suspended above torturing flames and are bound to thorny trees either by their hair or by their transpierced breasts. Some also have snakes hanging from their nipples for refusing to breast-feed.<sup>42</sup> However, to the modern reader's great surprise, in the second eternal punishment, the incestuous, the *fornicators* (debauched), the *bestial lustful* including the *stupratores* (rapists)—the most grievous sexual offenders—are depicted soaking in a valley of ice cubes, which, to say the least, appears as quite a mild punishment by comparison.<sup>43</sup>

#### MONACHAL PHANTASMAGORIA AND SEXUAL FANTASY

Some sexual transgressions were scrutinized more rigorously than others. This particularly applied to sodomy, which seemed to be the most highly criminalized of sexual offenses. Not only did it allow moral depravity to defile the body, but it was also a *peccatum contra naturam* (sin against nature) and, therefore, directly opposed to God's gift of life. This sin's prominent position in these types of texts is not surprising when one considers that, since women had been expelled from monasteries, promiscuity between monks had seemed a natural way to compensate for the lack of more "legitimate" partners. From the ninth century on, theologians had indeed been concerned by the practice of sodomy within the clergy, especially inside monasteries.

Consequently, *vitium sodomiticum* was considered as the most abject of sexual crimes. The infernal testimonies followed this trend, and the *Vision of Wettin* dedicates an important part of the journey in Hell to the sin of sodomy. In Chapter XIX, on several occasions, the psychopomp delivers long moral exhortations to Christians, warning

<sup>42</sup> "Inde in aliam vallem nimis terribiliorem deveni, plenam subtilissimis arboribus in modum hastarum sexaginta brachiorum longitudinem habentibus. Quarum omnium capita acsi sudes acutissima erant et spinosa. In quibus vidi transfixis uberibus mulieres dependentes, et uniuscuiusque illarum mamillas duo serpentes ebibebant. [...] Cuius rei femine nullam se sperantes habere culpam, nec sacerdoti quidem hoc dignantur confiteri; ideoque talem sustinent periculum. In eadem vero valle vidi alias mulieres a capillis suspensas flammis ardentibus concremari. [...] quod ideo talem patiuntur penam, quia viri sui torum maculantes et coniugalem fidem violantes cum aliis adulterium fecerunt." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 170.

<sup>43</sup> "[...] apostolus ostendit michi vallem terribilem, in qua innumeros quasi congelate glaciei acervos conspexi tante nimirum altitudinis, ut vix eorum cacumina oculis aspicerem. Que tamen gelu et algorem ut glacies et ustionem quasi ignis miserorum animabus exhibet. [...] Alios vero, qui maioris criminis noxa tenebantur, in ipsis summitatibus supersedere conspexi. [...] esse adulteros, incestos, stupratores vel concubinarum luxuriis inherentes et graviter in fornicatione lapsos..." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 170.

them that sodomites would be prostituted to demons.<sup>44</sup> Wettin is required to preach on Earth to help sinners battle this contagious curse. Later, in Chapter XXIV, the angel reiterates his extensive views against the sin of sodomy, calling it a "fatal disease of the soul against nature."<sup>45</sup>

There came a moment when the monastic infernal testimonies seemed the ideal vehicle to fight sexual deviance. Consequently, during the twelfth century, prestigious theologians—mostly from the Benedictine and Cistercian orders—not only composed penitentials, but also evolved the belief that salvation could not be reached outside of chastity. Among such scholars is Guibert de Nogent, a Benedictine who also contributed to the genre of the infernal testimonies with his *De vita sua sive monodiarum* (1116), a part of his autobiographical *Vitae*.<sup>46</sup> Therein, Guibert describes the punishment his adulterous father had to endure in Hell.<sup>47</sup> Everard's flesh is mutilated, and he carries a screaming infant inside an open wound in his side, the inevitable retribution of his lustful misconduct.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> "Licet enim, inquit, 'in diversa criminum numerositate ab auctore suo recedat humanum genus diabolo se mancipando: in nullo tamen deus inagis offenditur, quam cum contra naturam peccatur. Et ideo multa vigilantia certandum est omninils in locis, ne in' scelere sodomitico dei habitaculum vertatur in delubra daemonum. [...] Non solum enim inquit, hic morbus virulenta contagione inrepens inficit animas inter se concubitu masculorum pollutus, sed etiam in coniugatis multiplici peste concretus invenitur, dum in rabiem vexatione libidinis versi et instinctu daemonum agitati, naturae bonum a deo concessum in uxoribus propriis perdunt, ita ut toro immaculato in stupri maculam verso ambo coniuges prostituti daemonibus fiant. [...] Quamdiu enim in illa obscenitate polluantur, regni caelorum aditum numquam merentur..." Hettonis, *Libellus de Visione et Obitu Wetini*, chapter XIX.

<sup>45</sup> "Illis dictis iterum atque iterum de scelere sodomitico verbum intulit. Cetera enim vitia vitanda semel tantummodo notavit, hunc vero pestiferum animae morbum contra naturam commento diaboli suggestum, quinque et eo amplius vitandum repetivit. Hettonis, *Libellus de Visione et Obitu Wetini*, chapter XXIV.

<sup>46</sup> Guibert de Nogent, *De vita sua* (1053–1124), PL 156:837–962.

<sup>47</sup> Guibert of Nogent relates castration anxiety nightmares in his autobiographical memoirs (*De vita sua*), and tells war stories with graphic descriptions of genital mutilation, such as the account of Thomas of Coucy, who often hung his enemies up by their testicles and penises until their organs were ripped from their bodies (3.11). Guibert also relates the story of a young man who, on a pilgrimage to repent from a non-marital sexual union, was commanded by the devil to cut off his offending sexual organ and then use the same knife to slit his throat (3.19). Martin Irvine, "The Penis, Castration, and Identity: Abelard's Negotiations of Gender," in *Cultural Frictions: Medieval Cultural Studies in Post Modern Contexts* (Georgetown 1995).

<sup>48</sup> "Quaerit etiam qualiter se habeat. At ille brachio relecto cum latere adeo utrumque ostendit lacerum, crebris adeo vulneribus intersectum, ut magnus intuentem sequeretur horror, et commotio viscerum. Ad hoc etiam pueruli cuiuspiam species pariter aderat tantis clamoribus perstrepsens, ut ei quoque quae id intuebatur plurimum molestiae generaret. [...] In concisione ergo lateris corruptio est fidei socialis, in stridoribus autem

By taking the analysis of the message sketched in the infernal testimonies a little further, one notices that under the shared banner of chastity two different battles were actually being waged: continence was one, and, with time, as a greater degree of self-control came to be expected from members of society, the strict regulation of one's thoughts developed into another. Sexual fantasies thus became a fearsome enemy, a deeply hidden vice embedded within the human body, always threatening to take one unaware. Therefore, in order to stave off this spontaneous and almost irrepressible disease, it was thought necessary to keep one's mind fully engaged by work or prayer at all times, lest it be overtaken through idleness or the lack of constant vigilance. In his *Magna Moralia, Commentary on Job* (578–595), Gregory the Great discussed some of the more insidious ways in which the Devil afflicts God's holy people by funneling filthy thoughts into their minds when their guard is down, especially during slumber.<sup>49</sup> Using evil dreams, the mischievous spirit of *Diabolus* would generate repugnant desires through dreams meant to subvert all human efforts to preserve chastity.

Following this idea, Hélinand of Froidmont's *Vision of Gunthelm Cistercian Novice* (1161) describes a group of monks and nuns who succumb to sexual temptation. In retribution, their clothes are confiscated—a clear demotion from their clerical status—and they are violently beaten on the back of the head until their brains are expelled through their eye-sockets and their skulls fractured. Only in this gruesome way could this evil illness be exorcised.<sup>50</sup>

#### THE MONASTERY: A BETWEEN PLACE FOR A THIRD GENDER

Some medievalists, like McNamara, claim that confiscating sexuality from the clerics' lives triggered a crisis in their identities.<sup>51</sup> Others, like

infestae illius vocis, perditio male procurati infantis." Guibert de Nogent, *De vita sua*, PL 156:876.

<sup>49</sup> "Thus for Augustine and his successors, unwelcome sexual fantasies were the unsolicited and unwilling work of demons who penetrated the human senses, accessed the images stored in the memory, and came up with illusions so potent, so familiar, yet so diabolically vitiated that [...] the dreamer [was] without guilt. Dyan Elliot, "Pollution illusion and masculine disarray," *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (n. 5 above) 5.

<sup>50</sup> "Daemonibus ad hoc eos cogentibus: qui etiam postea eos percutiebant de fustibus per media capita usque ad excussionem cerebrorum, et eiectionem oculorum, et hoc incessabiliter." *Vision of the Cistercian Novice*, Helinand, PL 212:1060–63.

<sup>51</sup> McNamara argued in 1994 that the imposition of celibacy upon the clergy created a masculine crisis. Jo Ann McNamara, "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstruction of the Gender System," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis 1994) 3–29.

Swanson, discuss chastity as "emasculinity."<sup>52</sup>

I am more inclined to side with Jennifer Thibodeaux's position in "Rethinking the medieval clergy and masculinity," her introduction to *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, which she edited. She contends that celibacy and chastity granted monks full power on religious matters and excluded pious women from preaching. When Guigues du Chastel defined the rules of the Carthusian order of the Grande Chartreuse in 1128, he rejected women, saying that their ruses were a source of uncontrollable desire for any man, and that included Adam.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, far from being emasculated, the clergy could reinforce its masculinity by repressing the urge of sexual compulsion: "The constant physical temptations allowed the monk or priest to prove their manhood by denying the pleasures of the flesh."<sup>54</sup> Of course, we know from a dense body of literature—not only through the numerous fabliaux which mockingly depict merrymaking clerics abusing alcohol and fornicating, but also from legal documents, such as Synods, which could summon priests to answer for their sexual misconduct—that part of the clergy was not necessarily receptive to the canonical rules on clerics in general, and on chastity in particular. The priests and bishops that infernal travelers encountered in their journeys in Hell were more often than not suffering for having faltered, since most of this literature was, indeed, addressed to the monks themselves.

Consequently, the infernal testimonies abound with texts targeting the clergy's moral slackness. *The Vision of Alberic* follows two main directions: inappropriate sexuality in general and more specifically clerical depravity. The seventh purgative punishment, the *Concovinium*, displays the "hardest punishment for the worst sins." Not only does it castigate the depraved priest, but it also implicates the parishioners and the authorities who knew about his misconduct, yet accepted it and still attended his masses. They are condemned to be "remodeled" by being plunged in a huge container filled with molten bronze, tin, lead, sulfur, and resin, before being thrust into a burning

<sup>52</sup> R. Swanson uses the word "emasculinity" in "Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. Women and men in history, ed. Hadley, D. M. (London 1999) 160–77.

<sup>53</sup> "We absolutely forbid women to enter our bounds knowing that neither the Sage nor the prophet nor the Judge nor the Host of God, nor even the first man formed by the hands of God were able to escape the caresses and ruses of women [...]" in *Carthusian Order in England*, "Chapter 21 of Guigues' Customs of 1128," Margaret Thompson trad. (New York 1930) 26.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Thibodeaux, "The Sexual Lives of Medieval Norman Clerics" in Clussen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, (above) 473.

horse head.<sup>55</sup> The second eternal punishment takes place in a horrible and tenebrous *locus* reserved for defrocked clerics, who are relegated there either because they relinquished their vows or for having given in to mortal life's sexual delights. This portion of Hell is filled with snakes, dragons, scorpions, "yells," and "eternal moaning and screaming."<sup>56</sup>

#### THE FEMININE SYNDROME: VIRGINS OR DEMONS

Of course, the existence of women made the challenge of remaining chaste even more strenuous. Consequently, the infernal testimonies progressively tried to keep women separate from men in their depictions of the earthly plane, while forcibly uniting them in their representations of Hell. If women were relatively protected on the earthly plane at that time, being spared the bodily punishments which earthly justice reserved for their male counterparts—for example, women were not legally susceptible to the death penalty or to torture, as men were—such was not the case in clerics' depictions of the nether regions. Indeed, far from sparing women in their texts, the authors of infernal testimonies, fearing the strength of their own unwelcome desires, punished them all the more severely for seeing them as the source of their innermost temptations and the instruments of their weakness. As sin was originally born from the promiscuity of both sexes, it is hand in hand that male and female sinners were thus made to endure the atrocities they undergo in these texts.

In *Medieval Misogyny*, R. Howard Block points out the ambivalence of women's roles in the significantly titled chapter "Devil Gateway and

<sup>55</sup> "Vidi et aliud supplicium, graviorum scilicet criminum, quod audivi vocari concovinium. Quod ad instar cuiusdam vasis immense longitudinis atque vastitatis videbatur esse, plenum quoque erat ere, stagno, plumbo, sulphure et resina, ita omnibus liquescentibus et ferventibus acsi oleum in frixorio super ignem bulliens. In hoc vase ex uno capite tenebat caput equus quidam totus igneus, passuum sexaginta longitudinis, altitudinis triginta, viginti grossitudinis, ex alio vero capite per quoddam hostiolum ingrediebantur anime ibi cruciande. [...] In hoc tormento deputantur populares cuiuscumque ecclesie, qui scientes sacerdotem suum esse adulterum, periurum et excommunicatum, iniquitates eius tacite sustinent vel etiam defendunt et eius facinoribus assentientes officium eius audiunt. Si enim solius adulterii crimine reus esset, parrochia forsitan eius non tantum periculi sustineret; set solet evenire, ut de adulterio incidat in periurium vel excommunicationem." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 174.

<sup>56</sup> "Post hec vidi locum horridum et tenebrosum, fetoribus exhalantibus, flammis crepitantibus, serpentibus, draconibus, stridoribus quoque et terribilibus repletum ciulatus. [...] Esse his, qui ordinem ecclesiasticum reliquerunt, qui regulam monasticam dimiserunt et ad seculum reversi sunt et gaudiis eternis periture vite preposuerunt delicias; qui de peccatis suis desperaverunt, qui periurium admiserunt, qui adulterium, sacrilegium, falsum testimonium et reliqua crimina exercuerunt et penitentiam acceperunt, set fructum penitentiae non fecerunt..." Albericus Casinensis, *Visio Alberici*, ALIM 180.

Bride of the Christ." Indeed, in the infernal voyages, the female population of the nether regions' geography tends to fit the archetype—almost entirely designed by men—of the woman whose identity is partially defined through chastity.<sup>57</sup> Virginity was so important that in the *Visio Sancti Pauli Apostoli* (1150), the young women who had not respected their duty of purity are meted the same punishment as that received by child murderers.<sup>58</sup> To some, all women were then reified either as objects of God—through virtue—or of Evil—through seduction. As the ultimate foe, under these authors' pen every woman possessed a beautiful body, all the better to conceal her contemptible soul.<sup>59</sup> In *On the Purification of Women*, Rieder explains that most of the Church Fathers described women's reproductive organs and childbirth as dirty, disgusting, and impure.<sup>60</sup> At the end of the twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis aimed to goad clerics into chastity over twelve chapters of his *Gemma Ecclesiastica*. Blatantly misogynistic, his extremely violent tone is even more severe toward women. He stipulates that "women who prevent our salvation and lead us to damnation should not be called our friends but rather our dread enemies."<sup>61</sup> Edward Coleman, in his study on medieval monks, suggests that Giraldus' vivid descriptions of the sexual misdemeanors

<sup>57</sup> "For the early church fathers virginity always carries a reference to Adam and Eve before the Fall, a time when, it was assumed, because of the absence of sexuality the sexes were equal." *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York 1974) 217.

<sup>58</sup> "Et vidi illic puellas abentes indumenta nigra et angelos metuendos abentes in manibus suis catenas ignitas, et miserunt eas in ceruicibus earum et duxerunt eas in tenebras. [...] Haec sunt que cum essent uirgines constitute inquinaverunt uirginitates suas nescientibus parentibus suis; propter quod indeficienter persoluunt penas proprias. [...] Haec sunt mulieres commaculantes plasmam dei proferentes ex utero infantes, et sunt uiri concubentes cum eis. [...] Nefanda ora genitoribus nostris: ipsi enim commaculauerunt plasma dei, sed praecepta eia non obseruantes dederunt nos in escam cauibus et in coucalcationem porcis: alios proiecerunt in flumine." "Visio Sancti Pauli," in Montague Rhodes James, *Apocrypha Anecdota, a Collection of Thirteen Apocryphal Books and Fragments* (Cambridge 1893) 31–33.

<sup>59</sup> "The distinction between virgins in mind and chastity of the body is emphasized throughout, since there is no difference between desire and the act. The act is defined by the mental state of those who perform it. A virgin then is a woman who not only has never slept with a man, but also has never desired to do so," 98. "Virginity is in some deep sense precisely the opposite of the cosmetic; just as marriage is associated with ornamentation, virginity implies a lack of ornament," 99. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago 1991) 98–9.

<sup>60</sup> Churching was a ritual of purification to cleanse the blood of childbirth and the pollution brought by the necessary sexual encounter. "Churching changed a mother back into a wife." Paula M. Rieder, *On the Purification of Women: Churching in Northern France, 1100–1500* (New York 2006) 59.

<sup>61</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Jewel of the Church*, ed. John J. Hagan (Lugduni Batavorum 1979) 133.

of monks are so strong that they are probably colored by a long personal struggle for self-control.<sup>62</sup>

In the infernal testimonies, women's worst sin becomes their advocacy of lust and the power of their insatiable bodies.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, women, who generally did not write, had the compelling gift of "orality," which is to say that they knew how to wield words and were seen as highly persuasive and duplicitous, all to devastating effect. Guised in their terrestrial beauty, ornaments, seductive wardrobe, jewelry, and make-up, they could drag any man into decadence. All these reasons religious men had to fear women go a long way to explain why, in this textual Hell, the female sex was punished first and foremost for its slander, plotting, lies and vanity. Creating such an ontological—and essentially flawed—feminine nature was indeed the one method through which the monks could justify the punishment of the most irreproachable of all women: the virgin. In the infernal testimonies, courtly love gets suddenly inverted: while the *trouvères* lavishly praised the beauty of each part of the woman's body, the visionaries desecrated them one by one in order to prevent their bestowing moral pain and despair upon an enraptured *mankind*.

#### PERFORMING VIOLENCE TO DESECRATE THE TEMPTING BODY

Undoubtedly, for the monks who authored *edification texts*, only physical misery could help fight moral agony. For them, pain inflicted upon the body had restorative powers and was seen as a particularly effective and encouraged form of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the representations of suffering found in the infernal testimonies were purported to facilitate the cure of the dreaded sexual urge—construed as a real illness—through *catharsis*. In *Performing the bodies in pain*,

<sup>62</sup> Edward Coleman, "Nasty habits—satire and the medieval monk," *History Today* 43.6 (1993) 36–42.

<sup>63</sup> "Women's spirituality during the late middle ages is usually considered to be marked by erotic, nuptial and maternal themes, along with an increased attention to Christ's humanity. Augustine provided lurid and compelling descriptions of the body's susceptibility to demonic infiltration: this evil thing creeps stealthily through all the entrances of the senses; it gives itself over to forms, it adapts itself to colors, it sticks to sounds, it lurks hidden in anger and in the deception of speech, it appends itself to odor, it infuses taste." Karma Lochric, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (n. 4 above) 181.

<sup>64</sup> "The importance which theologians attached to painful means of redemption from sins was, it seems, immense. Guillaume d'Auvergne thought that Hell-fire was the metaphorical fire of passion, desire and anguish [...]," 132. "The masters developed the idea that the soul could suffer on account of a special union with the corporeal fire of Hell," 161. Donald Mowbray, *Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge 2009) 132, 161.

Marla Carson indeed states that the vision of inflicted pain was believed to be beneficial to medieval society.<sup>65</sup>

One can see how the cult devoted to the figure of Christ and to that of the martyrs, together with the widespread taste for public castigation and the fascination for infernal punishment, could lend a negative tinge to this age's expressions of violence, when they should rather be considered as *healthy* outlets. Still, in the infernal testimonies, lying lips are bitten by toads and snakes, suggestive breasts devoured by dragons, and genitals burned, melted, sealed, lacerated or beaten.<sup>66</sup> Because the two strongly polarized images of women most prevalent at the time are both idealized and thus equally alluring, albeit in different ways—they are cast on the one hand as beautiful virgins, naked and innocently arousing, or, on the other, as embodiments of the sexual fantasy of the wanton, shameless, overtly sexualized female—any description of a woman in any situation in a text would be a temptation to sin for a monk, and in this paradigm, man was paradoxically seen as the weaker of the two sexes. Those who had strength on their side and promoted women's repression ironically ended up seen as active champions, while the weak victims of lust were demonized. Consequently, in the infernal testimonies, lust becomes heinously punished: fornicators are gruesomely tortured as they melt into unformed matter and are left to putrefy surrounded by a disgusting, sulfuric stench. For example, in the *Vision of Tugdali* (1149), the fornicators are treated as if abhorrent:

[The adulterer, the angel said], he suffers the fire up to his waist because he sullied the sacrament of lawful marriage [...].<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> "Medieval theater stages pain as a component of affective spirituality, and spectators respond with compassion—in the pre-modern sense of cosuffering. In both periods, spectacular pain elicits an obligation, but the nature of that obligation differs. Thus the post-modern martyr play inspires outrage and public action, whereas the medieval saint play nourishes private spiritual practices [...]." 27. "Medieval lives of martyrs as evidence that one could undergo severe trauma without hurting. [...] The spiritual rectitude that made this possible not only brought one straight to Paradise after death but benefitted the Christian community as well, because saints remained involved with humanity and could intercede with God on behalf of those still alive. (Bloody martyrdom is somehow, beneficial to the society.)" 92. Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York 2010) 27, 92.

<sup>66</sup> Some of these motifs will be reused all through the Middle Ages. For example, *The Scala Coeli* (1323) by Jean Gobi, describes two dragons devouring the breast of a woman who committed infanticide, the beasts representing the infants who never had a chance to be breast-fed. Jean Gobi, *La Scala Coeli*, ed. Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris, 1991).

<sup>67</sup> Frater Marcus, *Visio Tugdali, The Vision of Tugdali*, ed. Jean-Michel Picard and Yolande de Pontfarcy (Dublin 1989) 145.

The souls [of the fornicators] were tortured by excruciating pains in their sexual parts, and furthermore their sexual organs seemed to be rotten with decay and crawling with worms.<sup>68</sup> The sexual organs of the men and women were like snakes which strove to lacerate the lower parts of the belly and then to pull out the viscera.<sup>69</sup>

The infernal testimonies had, indeed, become an extremely violent scene where any part of the body perceived as "erotic" was systematically desecrated, be they that of men, or women. Sexual acts in which sinners were involved, by the sheer ferocity and violence of their depiction, can be construed as so many punishments. As stated before, in Hell women and men alike were susceptible to the most extreme bodily intrusions. Not only were they repeatedly penetrated by all sorts of injurious tools, but bestial intercourse replaced the "natural" sexual act. Instead of receiving caresses, their genitals were violently struck, their flesh reduced to garbage and women's desirable breasts were cut, pierced, burned, broiled and even devoured by all kinds of symbolic beasts. In Helinand of Froidmont's work entitled *Revelation of William the Boy* (1146), the fifth *locus* stages condemned fornicators, and both females and males are fettered to fast-turning wheels by their genitals, which is but one example that shows how, during these times of exacerbated repression, neither sex was being spared in the infernal testimonies' representations.<sup>70</sup>

#### ERASING GENDERS

Originally, Hell was an abstract place where souls had to be punished by a symbolic fire, the worm of remorse, and, even worse, it also stood as a dam that deprived souls from the vision of God. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the infernal testimonies enriched this traditional picture by adding to it the use of harmful tools on corporalized bodies and of explicit torments in an escalation of materialized violence. During the twelfth century, the infernal testimony evolved into a vessel in which clerics could pour at will their wildest sexual fantasies. While most theologians, like Pierre Abelard in his *Dialogue of a philosopher with a Jew and a Christian* (1136-1139), call this infernal escalation into question and reject physical pain in favor of some sort of mystical or spiritual distress, this new "literary Hell" turned into an outlet for

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>70</sup> "Postea vidit multes super rotas volubiles affligi, viros per virilia, feminas per membras genitalia, et omnes clamabant: vae vae!" Helinandus Frigidi Montis, 1146 "Revelatione Inferni facta Guillelmo Puero," PL 212:1036.

sexual repression.<sup>71</sup> It also metamorphosed into a tool for revenge against those who were necessarily evil and responsible for men's fantasies: women. Yet it did not fail to castigate men themselves for their weakness; after all, they were the ones unable to quell their yearning, letting their flesh decide instead of their spirit, so to speak...

In the *Vision of the State of Souls* (1147) by Jean St Laurent, the sexual sinners are crudely mutilated and their genitals torn.<sup>72</sup> Since they wrongly used their gender-granting parts while on Earth, these are now confiscated from them in the netherworld: hence, men lose their masculinity and women their femininity.

Because one cannot undergo earthly suffering without reason, the suffering must be part of something bigger: a grand divine scheme. Therefore, childbirth's colpodynia is construed as a punishment: women give birth in pain because being pregnant is necessarily the result of sin. And in order to discipline their vanity, after giving birth, women's bodies, like the treacherous tools of seduction that they are, turn into the misshapen debris of their formal seductiveness. This theme is often depicted in the infernal testimonies: beasts impregnate the debauched so they can perpetually give birth and then be eaten by their own offspring, which will deliver them in turn. In the itinerant Irish Monk Marcus's *Visio of Tnugdali* (1149) for example, the author gives a detailed explanation of what happens after a monster fecundates depraved clerics and their evil seducers:

[The monster] devoured all the souls [of the religious fornicators...] When they had been and reduced to nothing in its belly [of the monster] it gave birth to them in the lake congealed with ice and there they were again subjected to the same torment.<sup>73</sup>

[The souls of the depraved clerics and the women they soiled] were pregnant and thus awaited the appropriate time of gestation leading to delivery. Also, inside themselves, their entrails were bitten in the manner of vipers by the progeny they had conceived, and thus they gestated miserably in the fetid water of the deadly sea thick with ice. When the time to delivery came, they filled Hell with their screaming and howling as they gave birth

<sup>71</sup> Pierre Abelard, *Dialogue entre un philosophe, un juif et un chrétien* (1136-1136), ed. Maurice de Gandillac *Oeuvres choisies d'Abelard, Logique, Éthique* (Paris 1993).

<sup>72</sup> "Monstrabantur ei in aere, qui a daemonibus pervagatur, cadavera jacentia, ubi videri poterat humana miseria. Imaginabantur illic corpora voluptuosorum suaviter viventium, et in luxuriis ea enutrientium: haec illic videbat projecta, aliqua corrosa usque ad pectus, vel solum ventrem relictum. De aliquibus aliqua raptabantur a daemonibus insultabant [...] quem per oculos, de immundo visu; quem per manus, de illicito opere. O quanti erant viri et feminae, quorum dilacerabantur loca genitalia! Quis hoc videns non admirabitur? Quis audiens non emendabitur?" Joannes Monachus St Laurentii, "Visio Status Animarum," PL 180:184.

<sup>73</sup> Frater Marcus (n. 67 above) 128.

to snakes. [...] They] gave birth not only through the organs nature has established for such a function, but through the arms and chest, and beasts came bursting out from every organ. The beasts they brought forth had burning heads with the sharpest iron beaks with which they tore to pieces the bodies from which they came. These beasts also had many stings in their tails, which were turned backwards like hooks, and they pricked the souls from whom they came.<sup>74</sup>

The official explanation of this phenomenon given by the psychopomp is that the debauched monks and nuns of both sexes give birth to snakes that come bursting out from their bodies in the same way that their carnal appetite had split open their faith in God, and that their bodies are torn to pieces just as Christ's sacrifice had been by their transgression. However, I read the scene as evidence of a systematic tendency of these texts to dismiss gender differences, thus also eradicating sexuality. Because women and men are both impregnated and give birth indiscriminately, the difference between genders and gendered roles gets obliterated, and sexuality is thereby totally expunged. Not only do both sexes suffer identically, but, moreover, they lose control of their senses and sexuality—they have been deprived of their sexual organs that were cut off their bodies, and then raped against their will.

Some of these texts lend what could be referred to as a performative capacity to symbolic images: the snake that often replaced the penis in biblical images here literally goes into defenseless bodies, regardless of their gender. The serpent digs its own path in the sinners' flesh in a violent intercourse bereft of either desire or pleasure. The authors of the twelfth century infernal testimonies painted terrifying *tableaux* where beasts penetrated the fornicators in collective rapes. In these graphic depictions, bodies intermingle much as in some sort of orgy where sex is shown under its most pugilistic guise, putting one in mind of something akin to a form of proto-hardcore pornography. The purposeful eviction in these texts of every remnant of sensuality from the sexual act reaches an apex in the *Vision of Gunthelm, Cistercian Novice*, as a sinner is forced to physically ingest his own virility in order to divest himself from it. Indeed, in a region of darkness and death, Gunthelm and the Archangel Raphael witness a man seated on an incandescent chair that burns his genitals. He is surrounded by beautiful women who shove burning candles into his mouth. After passing through his viscera, the candles—here put to use not only as a phallic symbol but also as the reminder of God's light on Earth—are expelled

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 130.

through the sinner's penis, a kind of excruciating mimicry of conception and delivery meant to purify with a phallic flame.<sup>75</sup> This scene subsumes all the symbolism surrounding forbidden sex, and the demons hiding their perversity under beautifully arousing feminine bodies epitomize the sexual confusion of the medieval clerics that leads them toward misogyny.

#### FROM PHANTASMAGORIA TO SADISTIC FANTASY

The imposition of chastity upon clerics and its unsuccessful extension to lay society triggered a new orientation in the infernal testimonies. The changes brought about by this new context within an "official" literature issued from monasteries did a lot to stir up the excitement of an ever-widening public for these stories, which were already extremely popular among the clerics. The texts also displayed strong sexual images that opposed the representations found in the growing vernacular writings, which were more oriented towards the depiction of behaviors characteristic of urban communities. Built on negativity, these monastic infernal testimonies prove how an essential part of society was struggling to fulfill its vows. They can also be cited as a catalyst for the obscene representations of genitalia—gigantic penises and oversized vaginas in graphic sexual scenes—that adorn certain Gothic churches across Europe. These images raise many questions: are they supposed to scare the virgin, dissuade and repulse the tempted, create an appeal for the reticent parishioner to come to Mass, or are they simply a form of amusement? Or are they intended to do all four? It is an interesting paradox that these erotic scenes in churches, similar in that to the sadistically arousing images of the infernal testimonies, were meant to generate fear but could also act as sexual stimulants that would lead to the very orgies and sexual depravity which they were intended to repress and prevent.

The attraction-repulsion system characteristic of the representation of sexuality in the Middle Ages reveals an ambivalent duality that resides at the heart of a misunderstood phenomenon. Monks, more than anyone else, had to overcome temptation in order to prove their strength and faith. Without this struggle there was no possible godliness, since Jesus himself had to choose to overcome his desire

<sup>75</sup> "Post haec vident hominem in ardente cathedra sedentem, ante quem stabant quasi pulchrae feminae, quae tenebant cereos ardentis quos impingebant in faciem eius, et in os, et retrahabant similiter ardentis per eius interanea, et semper banc pœnam patiebatur. Hic homo, ait angelus, amicus fuit carni suae, et inimicus animae suae, gulosus, et etiam luxuriosus." Helinandus Frigidi Montis, "Cisterciensis Novitii," *Chronicon* Year 1161, PL 212:481–1082.



when tempted by Satan. Sexuality, then, was rechanneled into perverse acts of submission and worship such as self-flagellation, self-torture, and extreme physical deprivation. At the heart of this philosophy, as the graphic nature of the infernal testimonies evinces, resides an unstable tension between a violence that was meant to frighten, dissuade, and humble, and a violence that could arouse and please, both spiritually and erotically. Knowing that most monks respected their vows of chastity, were sincere in their beliefs and were undoubtedly trying to achieve a certain degree of sanctity, we can either accept these texts as an expression of a mission to eradicate sexual excess, as a deviant way to access pornography, or as a cry for help. At the very least they are proof that the very fine line between pleasure and pain that sexuality so ambiguously straddles is a deep part of the human psyche and can never be separated from it.