



Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature

Rabelais, Brantôme, and the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*

David P. LaGuardia

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In memory of Frank Paul Bowman

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Introduction

In the last few decades, in the wake of groundbreaking research in feminist theory, masculinity as a conceptual category and masculinity studies have become areas of increasing interest to scholars.¹ This book contends that literature is a particularly valuable and dense source of information and knowledge about how masculinity was structured and how it functioned in the formation of men's identities in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It also argues that the figure of the cuckold provides a point of entry into the complexities of what explicitly and implicitly was presented as normative masculinity in Renaissance France. The kind of vernacular literature that appeared in print in France in the 1480s with the publication of the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, and which continued in the following centuries in Rabelais's *Tiers Livre* and in Brantôme's *Dames galantes*, represented a world in which the sexual desires of both men and women conflicted with the interdictions of the civil and ecclesiastic legal codes that defined marriage. The first of these texts is populated by characters who continuously break the rules of sexual exclusivity that were constitutive elements of matrimony and of the religious orders: husbands who try to seduce their chambermaids, who covet and possess their neighbors' wives, and who sneak into the beds of any woman who happens to be at hand; wayward wives who rush their husbands off to work, trap them in closets and clothing trunks, lock them out of the house, or simply run away, so that they can be with their lovers; priests, monks, and nuns who are not only gluttons and profligates, but who also indulge their prodigious sexual appetites whenever they have the chance, which often means that they have to run away from irate husbands and wives. With these kinds of stories in mind, of which the potential cuckold as a literary figure is always a collector, the Panurge of Rabelais's *Tiers Livre* is mired in ironic denial that he will ever be the victim of both married and unmarried women and their seemingly infinite ruses, which were catalogued in the clerical literature ranging from the *Lamentatione Matheoluli* to the *Disciplina clericalis*, and were subjected to countless variations in the novella tradition that flourished in Europe in imitation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Pre-modern audiences never tired of hearing cuckold stories and jokes. More than half of the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* are about cuckoldry, while Rabelais's *Tiers Livre* consists essentially of Panurge's desire for an answer to the question, "Dois-je me marier?" ["Should I get married?"], to which he receives the standard response, "vostre femme sera ribaulde, vous coqu par conséquent" (385) ["Your wife will be a slattern, consequently yourself a cuckold"] (289).² Finally, the large section

1 For a summary of the scholarship on the relation between these two fields, see Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed., *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1–29.

2 François Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Mireille Huchon (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). All parenthetical page references will be to this edition. All translations are from *The Complete Works of François Rabelais*, tr. Donald Frame (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

of Brantôme's text on the "gallant ladies" of the French court that I will examine is devoted to "Les Dames qui font l'amour et leurs maris cocus" ("On Ladies who make love and their cuckolded husbands"). Why was this figure so popular, and considered to be so funny by even the most erudite readers and writers of both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in the most varied of European cultural contexts? What was the cuckold's significance within the popular and public imaginary of the time, which has been preserved for us in the voluminous comic treatments of marriage and its undoing?

Throughout the following pages, I will argue that the cuckold must be understood as an embodiment of a particular type of historically-contingent masculinity that is an essential element of late-medieval and Renaissance culture. An understanding of the cuckold as a representative of masculinity requires that we examine the conceptual framework in which he makes sense. The primary components of this context are the institution of marriage before and during the period in which the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, the *Tiers Livre*, and *Les Dames galantes* were written, as well as the function of sex both within and beyond the bounds of marriage, and its regulation by explicit and highly-developed rules. In almost all cuckold stories, the supposed humor of the tale derives from the fact that "the man of the house" has been "unmanned" by his wife and her accomplices, who usually have as their goal the wife's sexual infidelity. The social being of this masculine personage was determined entirely by the diverse sets of laws governing marriage, which in turn were contingent upon the sexual usage that he made of his body in both civic and domestic space. In other words, throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, sexual activity was proscribed and prescribed in at least two ways: the major social institutions of marriage and the religious orders called either for celibacy or for the limitation of intercourse to one socially-sanctioned partner, whose status and being were predicated on this exclusivity. This regulation of sex produced gender difference as a series of social practices and institutions that had both positive and negative effects. People who engaged in sex beyond its codified restrictions were subject to both civil and ecclesiastic punishments and penances, but they also activated social networks or groups that constantly surveyed both public and private space in order to determine who was involved in relations with whom, and acted in order to maintain the social order that was based on institutionally sanctioned sex relations. All of this surveillance, legislation, and legal or civic action was undertaken from a decidedly "masculinist" point of view, meaning that the maintenance of the definition of men as men was the primary object of these kinds of activity.³

3 Throughout this study, I will use the term "masculinist" to refer to actions, ideas, and discourses that were consciously used and propagated in order to ensure the domination of certain kinds of men over women. I will use the term "masculine" to refer to the type of subjectivity and gender identity that is a function of masculinist practices, and "male" to refer to the biological characteristics of bodies that are distinguished from female ones in a very simple sense. Compare this usage to Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds., *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 117–32.

The narrative tradition that I will examine was inscribed within an immense intertextual corpus of legal, didactic, and pastoral works concerned primarily with defining what was appropriate and proper behavior for men, predicated upon the usage and surveillance of sex in both public and private space, which itself was contingent upon the legislation of sex within and beyond marriage. In general, the official codes that defined early-modern European sexuality appear at times to have been quite flexible, which meant that many offenses were prohibited yet tolerated, especially within the bounds of canon law and its application, and within pastoral practices that pardoned even sins such as bestiality and sodomy, which were thought to be “against nature.”⁴ The diverse laws governing marriage thus established an official/unofficial opposition that was rich in implications for comic literature, which exploited the possibilities of a transgressive “counter-rule” or “world upside-down,” requiring an intimate knowledge and understanding of the rule itself in order to achieve its effect.⁵ The cuckold was a key figure in this dichotomy, since he embodied the inversion of the patriarchal power structure of marriage, and since his very being depended upon a conception of the permitted and the prohibited that established legal and conceptual boundaries for masculinity within marriage. The husband whom one glimpses in the civil law texts of the period, who was a severe and at times even murderous guardian of his household’s honor, which entailed his wife’s sexual limitation to a given body and a given domestic space, is transformed in the comic literature into a stingy, paranoid, stupid, and often debauched buffoon who was, paradoxically, the hero of the inverted comic world of public festivals.⁶

I will argue here, then, that the literature devoted to cuckoldry should be read in the context of a much larger body of texts, in which the concept of normative masculinity is a function of an incessant intertextual process. This type of literature develops on two separate levels, one literal, that of the comic fiction, and the other figural, which enumerates the attributes of masculine identity within the social

4 See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: la volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 134–5, for a discussion of the confusion surrounding the status of sodomy in the early modern world. This notion of sodomy as an “utterly confused category” is picked up by Jonathan Goldberg in *Sodomities: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1992, 1–26.

5 The notions of the “world upside-down” and of the “counter rule” as principles of comic or “festive” writing are developed throughout Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

6 The literature devoted to the cuckold as one of the heroes of the carnival processions and *charivaris* of the late Middle Ages is enormous. Claude Gaignebet’s *A plus hault sens: l’ésotérisme spirituel et charnel de Rabelais* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986), is particularly instructive in this regard. See also Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); Jacques E. Merceron, *Dictionnaire des saints imaginaires et facétieux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), the entries for “Sainte Cornandine” and “Saint Cornèri,” 197. Several primary sources document the cuckold’s role in festival processions: see for example the *Recueil faict au vray de la chevauchee de l’asne, faicte en la ville de Lyon: Et commencée le premier jour du mois de Septembre, Mil cinq cens soixante six* (Lyon: Guillaume Testefort, 1566).

institution of marriage as it “interpellates” and “captures” men as gendered beings.⁷ Masculinity thus proliferates both within and even *as* the massive intertext devoted to marriage and the myriad transgressions that sought to undermine it. As one discourse among many others that relayed and supported one another, the cuckold literature helped to propagate a set of ideas that called on masculine subjects to perform their genders, and whose very meaning and structure was contingent upon the “correct” performance of that gender as the essential condition of marriage at the very foundation of social structure.⁸ At the philological origins of this tradition in the immense corpus of misogynist, exemplary clerical literature, the writing and retelling of anecdotes with their moral interpretations was an intentional and conscious reflection on what a “real man” should be and do in his relations with women and with other men. In the case of this literature, the inculcation of masculinity was a clear and integral structure that was found within the text, or perhaps constituted the text itself, at the same time that this inculcation required consistent and constant references to other texts in which misogyny and the structuring of masculinity operated together as the thematic foundations of a narrative practice. In other words, reading and writing for men throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance was in large part both a continuous reflection upon the relation of texts to other texts, and a constant consideration of what it meant to *be* a man, and to *read* as a man within the social context that was defined by those texts. The idea of “intertextual” masculinity that appears in my title is, therefore, quite simple, and concerns men’s activity as readers and writers of texts about being a man, written for the benefit and instruction of other men.⁹

The intertext that I will examine here as a conceptual foundation for the literature of cuckoldry includes several types of works: firstly, the enormous body of legal documents, both civil and ecclesiastic, from which one might discern the complex rules that governed marriage. Secondly, there are the penitentials or confessional manuals that drew the boundaries between licit and illicit sexual behavior for several categories of men (husbands, priests, clerics, bachelors) in their relationships with diverse categories of women (wives, widows, virgins, concubines). Thirdly, there are numerous “officialities” and criminal registers that enumerate sexual transgressions, how often the culprits engaged in them, and what they had to pay, literally and figuratively, for their crimes and sins. Finally, there are the voluminous collections of *exempla* that propagated a given notion of masculinity from men of one generation to those of another through a certain kind of didactic narrative practice. These documents offer a rather expansive view of the “official” conception of marriage

7 The terms “interpellation” and “capture” [*prise*] are borrowed from Louis Althusser, “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état,” in *Positions* (Paris : Éditions Sociales, 1976), 67–125, and Jacques Lacan, “Le Séminaire sur ‘La lettre volée,’” in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 19–75.

8 The notion of gender as performance is borrowed from Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9 The ideas of the “intertext” and of “intertextuality” have an extensive history in contemporary critical thought. For an overview of the term’s history and usage, see Laurent Milesi, “Inter-textualités: enjeux et perspectives,” in Éric Le Calvez and Marie-Claude Canova-Green, eds., *Texte(s) et intertexte(s)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 7–34.

in Europe, which was full of contradictions and tensions, relative tolerance beside intolerable ferocity unleashed against those who disobeyed gender rules. I would contend that these official documents constitute a material body of thinking not only about marriage, but also about what it means to be a “real man” in a very precise and historically contingent sense. Moreover, I will argue that the narrative literature that will be my object continues the elaboration of masculinity as a concept that took place over the course of nearly a thousand years in the legal, pastoral, and clerical texts that I have just mentioned.

Masculinity itself is an extraordinarily difficult concept to define, especially given the fact that, in our current theoretical context, it would undoubtedly be more appropriate to speak of “masculinities” always in the plural, since the selection of one given version of the gender assigned to men as normative would participate in the kind of hegemonic imposition of gender stereotypes and behaviors against which women’s studies, feminism, and gender studies have consistently struggled.¹⁰ At this point, the literature on masculinities in sociology, anthropology, critical theory, gender studies, feminist theory, and literary criticism is enormous.¹¹ The vocabulary that I will use to speak of a certain kind of historically contingent, normative masculinity as a concept will be derived from a limited number of now classic theoretical sources, and will use the following hypotheses as points of departure. The type of masculinity I will examine here is socially constructed, and has a concrete existence in the material practices that structure institutions (Althusser). It is configured within the visual field or domain of social space in the surveillance and display of consciously and coercively gendered bodies (Foucault). The masculine subject stratifies this space by casting his gaze upon the diverse objects of his desire, which form his identity as a gendered being in relation especially to other men (Lacan, Sedgwick). In this process, women’s bodies serve as markers or “fetishes” for the relations of men to other men that function as the conceptual grid upon which they continuously elaborate their gendered identities (Freud, Irigaray, Rubin). Masculinity is hence a performance within the social domain, intended to produce a gendered body that may and must be read as such in visual terms (Butler); it is also a set of signs and

10 I am grateful to Juana Sabadell-Nieto for pointing out to me that using “masculinity” in the singular is quite problematic. Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, I will use masculinity as a singular noun in the following pages in order to refer to a given set of practices, behaviors, attitudes, and ideas that were affirmed by certain men as normative in the historical context that will be my focus here.

11 For a useful summary of definitions of and approaches to masculinity studies in these diverse fields, see R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, eds., *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 1–26; Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds., *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 1–9; Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, eds., *Theorizing Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994). On masculinity in Renaissance France, see Kathleen Perry Long, ed., *High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002); Todd Reeser and Lewis Seifert, eds., “French Masculinities,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. XLIII, No. 3 (Fall 2003); Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

disciplinary marks written on men's bodies considered as legible surfaces that are continuously deciphered by other men (Grosz).¹² From this theoretical point of view, one of the central material practices involved in the performance of masculinity for an important class of men in the early modern period was that of reading and writing.¹³ The fundamental thesis or insight that I will present here is that masculinity as scopoc drive, set of relations, mode of surveillance, corporeal and linguistic performance, and manipulation of a visual, spatial, and imaginary social domain develops within and as the intertextual practices of a particular written tradition, stretching from the earliest legal compendia, to canon law texts, to penance manuals, to criminal registers, to didactic clerical manuals, and finally to the comic narrative literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Some points concerning the critical apparatus that I will employ in the following pages require clarification, since their usage might lead some readers to conclude that I am presenting this reading of a specific historical masculinist practice in terms of timeless theoretical truths. This reading is Lacanian in that it examines the positions of the cuckold tale as "subject positions" into and out of which individual characters circulate. The act of occupying one of these positions constitutes becoming or being a particular kind of masculine "subject." While these roles are socially determined, they involve the person who inhabits them in intellectual and intertextual processes that constitute his subjectivity. "Having" a gender, to my mind, is precisely taking up residence in one of these positions, which is structured in the social domain, and which must be recognized both on a collective and an individual level (this is essentially Panurge's problem in the *Tiers Livre*, as we will see in chapter 3).¹⁴ This does not mean, however, that this is a strictly psychoanalytical reading: this book uses

12 See Althusser, "Idéologie,"; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I and Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La lettre volée'"; Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 204–209; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions du Minuit, 1977); Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 770–94; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

13 One of my readers suggested that "warrior masculinity" was perhaps the most important and noteworthy manifestation of a normative gender form throughout the early modern period. Brantôme's work, like that of so many other memorialists and biographers of the second half of the sixteenth century, supports this claim, since the bulk of his writing describes the exploits of noble captains and soldiers. My goal here, however, is to examine a "domestic" form of masculinity, which complements its belligerent counterpart, as we will see in chapters two and three.

14 Judith Butler comments on this kind of subjective "occupation" of recognizable gender positions as follows: "The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one which, justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human, but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, at the moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may

Lacan's idea of intersubjectively-defined subject positions as a metaphor to describe the ways in which male characters in (fictional) stories (attempt to) occupy multiple positions that are socially pre-determined as belonging to the masculine gender role. More specifically, this analysis describes the importance of reading, writing, and storytelling done by men to or for other men in the occupation of these pre-determined "sites" of masculinity. My primary contention is that the performance of the male gender in the texts that I analyze is inherently intertextual, and relies upon modes of textual practice, transmission, and "telling" that men have passed on to one another from generation to generation at least since the texts from late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages that I will examine in chapter one. More narrowly, this study contends that a specific mode of storytelling, that of men speaking and writing to other men about marriage, cuckoldry, and the varieties of adultery, was one of the main elements in the performance of a masculinity that was implicitly described as normative. As I have already noted, Butler's notion of gender as performative is hence crucial to my understanding of how masculinity "works" in this context. I will accept as a given in the following pages the definition of gender as a set of "performative acts" that are defined differently in diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts such as the one I examine here, and which must be repeatedly assumed by subjects in the elaboration of their own exteriorized identifications in gendered terms.¹⁵

The following readings also "use" or "apply" in a metaphorical sense Lacan's theories regarding the role of the gaze (*le regard*) in the structure of subjectivity, especially in the subject's relation to or projection into space.¹⁶ My usage of this theory is motivated by the insistence of the legal and didactic texts examined in chapter 1 that men must be vigilant in their surveillance of the domestic space that is under their control and of the women's bodies that are "given" to them by the institution of marriage. For Lacan, a certain manner of looking at oneself and accommodating oneself as a "stain" in the field of vision is constitutive of the "capture" of the subject's very being within that visual domain. Similarly, the male characters whom I will examine here as masculine subjects seem constantly to structure their subjective being in relation to their visual surveillance of domestic and civic space, and of gendered bodies, including their own, that act within that space. These men see themselves as a set of practices and actions that they must accomplish in that space, and they are dedicated to envisioning themselves within this pre-ordained social role. My insistence on the agency of the masculine gaze in the configuration of the *domus* in the following pages is a corollary to my primary thesis that the male gender role is explicitly described in an intertextual corpus disseminated among men, while the acts of reading, writing, and storytelling that

well feel like the unrecognizability of one's gender and, hence, the unrecognizability of one's personhood." *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58.

15 See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," in Rivkin and Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: an Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 900–911.

16 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XI : les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

are integral to this dissemination are constitutive elements of the performance of masculinity in this historical and cultural context.

My usage of the Lacanian notion of the gaze as one of the bases of masculine subjectivity has been considerably influenced by other theorists who have dealt with the subject. Laura Mulvey's seminal article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," developed the Freudian notions of "scopic desire" and "scopophilia" to which I refer throughout this argument.¹⁷ My usage of these terms in the following pages refers to a pleasure in looking linked to the "proper" disposition of domestic space that is a priority of the male characters who appear most notably in the tales of the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*. In other words, what a normative "man" in this context wanted to see was that his household was in order, that he had visual access to all of its secret corners, and that his wife occupied her proper place within it. Of course, in comic tales and anecdotes about adultery, the other characters in the typical adulterous triangle—the wife, the lover, and their accomplices—do everything in their power to ensure that the would-be normative husband is blinded, imprisoned, and humiliated in his own house. As we will see, the social order represented in these texts is an extraordinarily visual one, which means that the concept of masculinity that one derives from them is also partly a desire to see the social world, with its bodies and its domestic and civic spaces, organized in a specific way that confirms the masculine subject in (the place of) his gendered identity. The literary, legal, and pastoral intertexts that I examine here are essentially manuals on how to organize domestic space, how to discipline women's bodies within it, and how to inspect space and to place it under surveillance such that it will confirm or even personify the masculinity of the man who inhabits it. The "scopophilia" that I borrow from Freud via Mulvey is the pleasure experienced by the normative masculine subject when he sees what he wants to see, i.e., the projection of his own gender being into domestic space. It should be clear from the preceding sentences that the ways in which the masculinist gaze configures space and disciplines bodies is formulated in the terms made famous by Foucault in his well-known chapters on Bentham's panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, and in his description of the "apparatus of sexuality" in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

My thinking about masculinity has perhaps been most influenced by Althusser's famous definition of ideological interpellation, which is the basis of my idea of masculinity as intertextual transmission. The "ideology" of the male gender role calls upon men to perform their gender by reproducing that ideology in or *as* texts and stories about its numerous variations, and the dangers that women's agency presents to them as masculine subjects. To express my thesis in the Althusserian terms that are implicitly yet continuously developed in the following pages, masculinity as a dominant ideology has a material existence as the intertextual practice of telling stories, expressing opinions, and transcribing examples concerning adultery, cuckoldry, and "women's wiles," which men are called upon to share with one

17 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 438–48. For Freud's treatment of scopophilia, see *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, tr. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

another. For example, in the famous scene from Rabelais's *Tiers Livre*, which I will examine in detail in chapter three, the doctor Rondibilis says to Panurge, who has come to consult him as to whether he should marry or not, "... quand vous oirez dire de quelqu'un ces trois motz : « Il est marié », si vous dictiez : « Il est doncques, ou a esté, ou sera, ou peult estre coqu » : vous ne serez dict imperit architecte de consequences naturelles (452–3) ... ["when you hear said of anyone these three words: 'He is married,' if you say: 'Then he is, or has been, or will be, or may be a cuckold,' you will not be called an inexpert architect of natural consequences" (355).] The pronunciation of this kind of sentence, the act of asking another man to articulate it, and its transcription in a book meant to be published for the reading pleasure of learned men, are among the concrete acts that constitute the material existence of the normative masculinity that I will examine in the following pages. Once again, my fundamental point here is that the primary material manifestation of this masculine "ideology" was the dissemination of a legal, literary, and didactic intertext that men transmitted to one another over the course of centuries.

This intertext may be divided into two opposing groups of documents, one "official" and serious, the other "unofficial" and comic. On the official side, there was a vast body of texts representing given institutions or individuals (the courts, the Church, local dukes or princes in the case of customary laws, one generation of clerics responsible for passing on a kind of masculine wisdom to the next generation of clerics), preoccupied by the surveillance and control of a wide range of sexual acts that were categorized according to their relative severity as infractions of a given law. While the categorization of these transgressions did not necessarily constitute the "identities" of the individuals who were guilty of them, the type of masculinity that is my subject here was contingent upon the kinds of acts in which both men and women engaged in relation to this general notion of legality.¹⁸ On the unofficial side, in texts that seem to be concerned only with entertainment, the *nouvelle* literature is an intertext in which the characters represent primal figures who return repeatedly in different guises. Cuckold stories are thus doubly intertextual: for their meaning, they rely upon a constant series of references to other cuckold stories, as well as upon

18 As Foucault pointed out, in early modern society, there were large "gray areas" when it came to the status of sexual acts in relation to the notion of identity. Foucault famously proclaimed that such interdicted acts as sodomy and incest did not constitute the culprits of these acts as "sodomites" or "perverts"; rather, one was guilty of an act that had to be atoned for, but which did not constitute the essence or the identity of the individual. See *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 59. This thesis has been debated extensively since the publication of Foucault's work. Didier Eribon provided one of the most detailed critiques of Foucault's thinking on this matter in the final section of *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), translated by Michael Lucey as "Michel Foucault's Histories of Sexuality," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2001; 7 (1): 31–86. For a discussion of recent arguments for and against Foucault's controversial insight, see Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History," *PMLA*, October, 2005 (Volume 120, Number 5), 1608–17. See also Carla Freccero's extensive discussion of the modernist preconceptions that dominate the acts versus identity debate concerning the early-modern world in *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 31–50. I am grateful to the outside readers of Ashgate for calling my attention to the chapters by Eribon and Freccero.

an incessant, implicit reference to the official conception of masculinity inscribed in legal and clerical documents. In this sense, the literature of cuckoldry catalogues the attributes of a kind of masculinity that exists within and as these enumerations themselves, while telling stories about cuckolds is a practice in which normative early-modern masculinity, as a constitutive element of a dominant ideology, has its material reality.

The tale of cuckoldry, along with its later variations in Rabelais and Brantôme, puts into play a vast intertext on masculinity as it relates to marriage and the law, and especially to a problematic and misogynist conception of femininity that has deep roots not only in Western literature, but in Western philosophy and law as well.¹⁹ Masculinity is thus both a structure within the text (the standard set of variations on male-female sexual relations both within and beyond the bounds of marriage, and the comic undermining of masculine attributes that is a consequence of adultery), as well as a much larger structure that lies outside of the immediate context of the works themselves, in the “official” texts on marriage and adultery. Chapter 1 is devoted to an examination of a significant “sampling” of both civil and canon law texts, penance manuals, criminal registers, and collections of *exempla* that predate my primary texts and serve as an intellectual context for them. The *Digest of Justinian*, for example, provides a very early and foundational definition of marriage that prescribes different roles for men and women within this fundamental social institution. Later texts, such as Gratian’s *Concordia discordantium canonum*, look at marriage from a more theological perspective that categorizes specific sexual acts within and beyond marriage in terms of a striking, if implicit, definition of gender difference. Similarly, penance manuals ranging from the earliest Irish examples of the genre to Thomas de Chobham’s *Summa confessorum* offer an implicit yet comprehensive definition of the differences between men and women as gendered beings that will be essential to my reading of masculinity in cuckold stories in the following chapters. The ideas of sex and marriage that are developed within these texts, in criminal registers such as the *Registre criminel du Châtelet de Paris*, and in *exempla* collections such as the *Exempla ex sermonibus vulgaribus* of Jacques de Vitry, all of which I will examine briefly in the first chapter, serve as the conceptual paradigm that makes possible a reading of the cuckold tale as a problematic and often paradoxical intertextual elaboration of a certain kind of masculinity.

Chapter 2 focuses on the transmission of a particular “story of women” in the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, which is the basis of both the official doctrine that mandates the control of women’s desire, and of the comic literature in which the supposedly unbounded nature of women’s bodies undermines the obsessive masculinist need for control and power. The cuckold himself is a scrupulous reader of the intertext of clerical, misogynist literature, in which the potential ruses of women are detailed and catalogued. He is always accompanied in these stories by his wife, her would-

19 Feminist thinkers have long argued that Western philosophy rests upon a foundation that requires a fundamental characterization of the feminine as the “other” of the masculine. For a discussion of the foundations of this mode of thinking in Plato’s *chora* in the *Timaeus*, and the modern critiques of Derrida and Irigaray of this concept, see Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 111–24.

be lovers, and numerous other “attendants.” The role of the masculine gaze in the working out of this triangular, intersubjective drama is primordial since it surveys the topography of imaginary space and saturates it with opposing values defined by the performance of gender difference. Interiors (bedrooms, closets, clothing trunks, storage bins, etc.) are spaces of punishment for the married man, and places of pleasure and transgression for his wife and her lovers. Exteriors are realms of work, warfare, and of the public surveillance of the female body that constitutes the social order. This scopic configuration of space was literally legislated in the legal texts examined in chapter one, while the material limitation of women’s roles in domestic and public spaces as a foundation of patriarchy has long been one of the primary topics of feminist theory, which is thus an indispensable aid in the reading of this text.²⁰ The chapter concludes with a consideration of the consequences of this gender system when the jealous cuckold becomes serious, and turns the full force of masculine violence against the fantasy figure of the insatiable wife and her many lovers, resulting sometimes in the literal castration of the usurping lover, and even in his murder, along with that of the unfaithful wife. Consequently, masculinity in this context often entails its own undoing, since the symbolic and material violence done to women that is one of its foundations ultimately is a form of violence against the social order that gender differentiation institutes.

Chapter 3 examines the peculiar form that the cuckold story assumes in Rabelais’s *Tiers Livre*. This extraordinary text presents a series of internal intertexts—quotations, prophesies, poems, medical pronouncements, etc.—that are offered in response to Panurge’s query concerning his future life as a married man. The diverse interpretations of these texts inscribe the primary elements of masculinity that are evident from the intertext of cuckold stories: an obsession with the social implications of sex, a dread of unbounded women’s sexuality, a paranoia concerning the virility of the male body that will always be inadequate to women’s desires, a fierce jealousy against possible sexual rivals, etc. These elements may once again be discerned beneath the literal level of a work that seems to be concerned primarily with processes of reading and interpretation, and with the “correct” method of telling stories, which is intimately linked to the elaboration of this kind of masculinity.²¹ The *Tiers Livre* runs the gamut of subjects and obsessions that constitute the core of the cuckold’s being, and which are reflected at all of the discursive levels on which the text operates: the need for a hyperbolic proclamation of an imaginary masculine virility, which is confirmed as a truth of the male body in medical discourses; a dread of castration that is transformed into the vituperative promise to castrate other, usurping males, which is justified in legal discourse; the ambivalence of a masculine subject who sees his own body as a kind of seminal cornucopia that is, nonetheless,

20 See Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 111–24, for a discussion of the deep roots in Western philosophy of men’s misrepresentations of women’s relation to space as one of the foundations of masculinist hegemony.

21 Edwin Duval reads the opening of the *Tiers Livre* as a commentary on the correct method for “writing histories,” that is, of telling stories, which was inspired largely by Lucian’s *How to Write History*. See *The Design of Rabelais’s Tiers Livre de Pantagruel. Études Rabelaisiennes XXXIV* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), 15–29.

the butt of jokes and scorn, as in the novella literature; the specular construction of masculinity as the model for all textual procedures and even for the interpretation of truth, as in the clerical literature; the fear provoked by the male body's possible inadequacy when faced with women's overabundance, which serves as a pretext for bonding among men. Chapter 3 thus highlights the extent to which this polyvalent text is largely concerned with the construction and performance of the masculine gender in a very restricted and historically-contingent context, which nonetheless is elaborated within the surprisingly diverse intertext that is reflected in the work.

Chapter 4 is a reading of significant passages of Brantôme's *Dames galantes*. This anecdotal work provides some of the most stunning examples of the ways in which early-modern masculinity constructed itself through the display of masculinist emblems in and around the women's bodies, to use Brantôme's own formulation. Just as this mode of producing the male gender fragments men's being into dispersed visual signs, it also transforms the male body's virility into economic commodities, in a process which Brantôme calls a "distillation spermatique." In other words, Brantôme sees masculine physical superabundance as the basis of a homosocial economy, in which the demands of an ever unbounded female body bring forth an equally limitless masculine capacity for producing what Montaigne called "une bonne semence" in "De l'oisiveté."²² Brantôme is hence largely concerned with giving a narrative account both of the women whose hyperbolic desires participated in the interpellation of men as men, and of the material consequences of these interpellations, which writers were obliged literally to count and to present in narrative accounts. In this work, the display of masculinity is hence essentially a process of economic accumulation in writing, which represents not only a fantasy image of women as insatiable beings who call forth men as sexually indefatigable—which is a familiar topos of both comic and serious literature²³—but also uses the process of this imaginary interpellation as the basis and the motivation of a textual practice.

In a sense, the intertextual elaboration of masculinity that I trace here reaches its culmination in both Brantôme and Rabelais. From the starting point of legal texts concerned with the literal prescription of what constituted men as men, these later writers were essentially engaged with gender as a trope that allowed for rhetorical imitation and improvisation. Through the reading of these works, masculinity may ultimately be understood as an entity that can be located within them as a kind of rhetorical "play" or "effect." Men were called upon by other men to tell stories about gender difference, with the consequence that their being as gendered subjects was displayed within writing, as a mode of storytelling, and as a long intertextual tradition. Moreover, Brantôme's work represents a significant departure toward perverse or perhaps even "queer" sexual practices that might be involved in the elaboration of masculinities that are well beyond the bounds of the normative model

22 Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 33.

23 Montaigne's "Sur des vers de Virgile" includes an interesting discussion both of the insatiable woman topos and its counterpart, that of the tireless man. See Montaigne, 832–3 and 844–5.

examined here. It could be argued, in light of recent theoretical developments, that the normative masculinity that is the subject of this text could and perhaps even should be read in the context of its constant attempts to displace and even efface these “other” sexualities and “other” masculinities. This book develops gradually from an initial stage in which it seems as though early-modern masculinity is a kind of monolith that displays itself within a number of different discourses, to a final stage in which the norm of the male gender appears to be unthinkable without the numerous others from which it continuously distinguishes itself. At its conclusion, I hope that it will be clear that this implication was present from the beginning, and that even the most monolithic masculinity has always been structured in terms of its constant instability and undoing in the face of unquantifiable others that were beyond men’s control. The most noteworthy of these were undoubtedly the figure of woman and the possibility of her agency, which, as Rabelais’s work makes evident, served as definitive points of reference in the configuration of masculinity.

In more general terms, genders and the subjective identities that are largely a function of them are constructed in different kinds of activity in the material world: disciplines, educations, punishments, therapies, medical interventions, ceremonies, institutions, propaganda, fashion, etc. Literature as an imaginary discourse plays an important role in supporting, disseminating, and ultimately transforming the official discourses concerning gender and identity that structure our conception of the social world. The rather vast “literature” on marriage and adultery, which includes (romance) novels, soap operas, television drama series, films, fashion magazines, tabloids, and afternoon talk shows, continues to play a major role in our perceptions of ourselves as gendered beings. By reading a specific moment in the history of this ever expanding literature, we may ultimately recognize the extent to which we have always been interpellated and captured in and as our genders by certain persistent kinds of narrative about sexual difference. It could be argued that by concentrating on the increasing instability of what was supposedly a monolithic and invariant performance of masculinity, one radically revises our understanding of what that masculinity may have been in the distant past. I hope that the work undertaken in the following pages ultimately contributes to the “queering” of the history of gender that has been so important in scholarly discourse over the past fifteen years, at least as Goldberg and Menon have described it. Despite reactionary proclamations to the contrary, masculinity is not and never has been the solid and stable entity on which anxious men both then and now wanted to construct their identities. By reading this desired stability essentially as a constant “work in progress” within a broad intertext, I hope that my work here demonstrates that the goal of building a single, impenetrable gender that would serve as the basis of any individual’s subjective identity was an ideal that remained unachievable in early-modern France. This book describes the material foundations upon which men sought to construct their masculinity at a specific moment in history, and within a given corpus, but it also describes that construction as a project that some men, such as the ones Brantôme describes at the end of the period I examine here, increasingly abandoned in order to “inhabit” other bodies and other pleasures. We can only hope that their example will allow us to do the same.

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Chapter 1

Masculinity as an Intertextual Concept in Legal, Pastoral, and Clerical Documents of the Late Middle Ages

Introduction

The reality of sexual behavior and its regulation in civil and ecclesiastic legal practices at the end of the Middle Ages is inscrutable and perhaps irreducibly multiple. The enormous body of documents available to us from the fifth through the sixteenth centuries—the *Corpus iuris civilis*, the *Corpus iuris canonici*, the penitential books, the criminal registers of the civil and church courts, collections of *exempla*, and the literature of the period, including the *nouvelles*—provide anything but a coherent picture of sex and its role in the all-important institution of marriage as it would have been understood by the writers whom I will examine in the following chapters. The complexity of what marriage and sex may have *really* been when the anonymous author of the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* transcribed his tales, when Rabelais sent Panurge in search of an answer to his question in the *Tiers Livre*, or when Brantôme described “Les dames qui font l’amour et leurs maris cocus” requires that one read a wide variety of conflicting texts on the subject dating from the beginning of the Christian era in Europe to the Renaissance, during which marriage was drastically transformed. This chapter will discuss the different conceptions of sex and matrimony that may be derived from a significant sampling of the official documents concerning marriage in order to provide a broad background for narrative representations of social relationships between men and women determined by this fundamental social institution. The “official” representations of sex derived from these works provide a context for the understanding of adultery as it is presented in narrative literature. The early modern obsession with the cuckold as a paradoxical embodiment of masculinity might thus be explicated through an examination of the intertextual relationship between official and unofficial, “true” and fictional accounts of sex, its place in marriage, and the elaboration of the masculine gender as a concept in relation to the different roles for men and women configured by marriage.

Some of the most important civil law texts of the Middle Ages depict a rather severe portrait of matrimony and sexuality, which were strictly regulated within the social world that they helped to structure. The desires of men and women were secondary to the economic, even mercantile relationships that marriage established between families. As such, any sexual activity that took place beyond the bounds

of the marriage bed and the couple was perceived as a threat to these arrangements and could be severely punished. According to some civil law texts, both fathers and husbands had the right to kill their adulterous daughters or wives, just as they had the right to kill their lovers if they caught the two of them in the act, within the household of either the husband or father-in-law. From this point of view, sex and desire were subversive forces that were “demonized” especially in the case of women who indulged their pleasures beyond the legal boundaries of their own homes and husbands. Unequivocally, a sexually active woman who did not uphold her marriage vows was a criminal who could be subjected to the most severe capital punishments; moreover, most women accused of crimes were also said to be guilty of adultery or fornication. The case of male adulterers was much less dramatic; the criminal registers of the Middle Ages do not impute “loose” sexual behavior to every commoner who is accused of theft or larceny, as is the case with most women accused of crimes.

Beside the stringency of civil law and custom, canon law and penance manuals depict an alternate reality in which sexual excess was included within a general ethical code that stressed the possibility of atoning for one’s sins in the future, whereas the civil code seems to have been much more focused on the dowry, and on the means of recovering it if the marital contract was broken. From this perspective, the penitential books describe an alternative model that allowed for sexual indiscretions as long as those who were guilty of them made amends in one way or another. “Illicit” sexual activity in all of its varieties—incest, bestiality, masturbation, fornication, adultery, sodomy, rape—could be atoned for by penances that consisted of one kind of abstinence or another (from wine and meat, from juicy foods, from all foods but bread and water, etc.), over varying periods of time. Sexual transgressions had no place in marriage from this ecclesiastical perspective, since copulation served merely as a means of “consummating” the union between husband and wife, while sexual pleasure was not a necessary component of married life; on the contrary, sex that was too pleasurable within a marriage was considered sinful. Beyond the bounds of marriage, these indiscretions were examined strictly from a masculine point of view, and came in many varieties. Adultery, for example, was defined as copulation between a man and a woman betrothed to, or married to, another man, while fornication was the same act performed by a man with a widow or a girl. In both the civil and ecclesiastic systems, therefore, men were the subjects of sex and its control, while women served as the conduits through whom goods were exchanged from family to family, or as the supports of a varied and often violent sexual activity that took place beyond the limits of the marriage contract.¹

1 This depiction of marriage is a deliberately simplified one based on the primary texts that I will read here. In the enormous scholarly literature on the subject, historians are quite divided as to its exact nature in the Middle Ages. D.L. D’Avray, for example, argues that the familiar description of marriage, supported by eminent scholars such as Georges Duby, as a proprietary transaction between families in which affection and above all religious symbolism played a secondary role is a caricature that he corrects with a detailed account of the symbolic significance of the sacrament in medieval religious life. See D.L. D’Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–18. In contrast, Nira Gradowicz-Pancer argues that even the seemingly primary notion of women’s

In general, then, the role of sex in marriage varies according to the document that one reads. Within the code of civil law, its place was absolutely limited to the couple, with severe repercussions for offenders of the established order. From the point of view of the Church, however, the punishment for adultery and fornication was limited to more or less severe forms of repentance. Nevertheless, it is clear from these documents that gender difference is the determining factor in the formulation of the law. Since the law was inherently masculinist, its configuration of social structures both relied upon and constituted an elaboration of the concept of masculinity almost as the basis of the very notion of legality. For men, the possibility of sex beyond the bounds of marriage meant that they were responsible for the surveillance and control of their wives' bodies, and for protecting their homes and wives from the possible assaults of other men. The two possible roles that men could play in this schema were, therefore, that of the husband, guardian of the *domus* of his marriage, or that of the usurping lover, who sought an illicit sexual satisfaction with women categorized in terms of their relationships with men, running the gamut from virgins, to wives, to prostitutes, to adulteresses, to widows. The difference between masculine and feminine in this context, then, was quite conventionally that which separated subject from object, authority from subjection, the ruler from the governed, and this difference generated two contradictory kinds of masculine subjectivity.

On the one side was the male interpellated as a masculine subject who meticulously, even obsessively, legislated his relationship to other men via the institution of marriage and its transfer of wealth and property. This kind of subjectivity focused its attention incessantly on the threat to the marriage posed by the possible sexual indiscretions of the wife. The code of honor and the vengeance that accompanied its abrogation were based upon a perception of women's desire as boundless, treacherous, even criminal, and this distrust of desire in general was complemented in the Middle Ages by the Church's official vilification of sex as sin, at the same time that penance seemed to provide a space for sexual transgressions. Woman, therefore, was an entity that men sought to quantify, to place under surveillance, and to contain within boundaries. Her desire for sex was conceived of as unbounded, untouchable, unquantifiable, even criminal. Curiously, however, this categorization of woman as the unknown quantity in a legal system based upon knowledge of her behavior was the mirror image of the desire that defined a second masculine subject position, that of men who always sought their pleasures beyond the bounds of the economy of sex and property that was inherently masculinist. In other words, marriage was instrumental in the structuring of a patriarchal, social, and sexual economy built upon an aporia at its core: that is, the necessity that men had simultaneously to control their own wives' desire, to provoke the desire of other men's wives, and, as we will see in

sexual purity was secondary to the social and collective bonds established among families by marriage, meaning that its larger implications were fundamentally important both from the point of view of the individual and of the "clan" to which she belonged. See "Honneur féminin et pureté sexuelle: équation ou paradoxe?" in Michel Rouche, ed., *Mariage et sexualité au Moyen Âge: accord ou crise?* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000), 37–51. The contradictory conceptions of marriage throughout the early modern period might be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

both Rabelais and Brantôme, to incite the desire of other men for their own wives. This set of incompatible imperatives generates virtually the entirety of the literature devoted to cuckoldry and adultery.

An important question that has to be raised here is that of the definition of a “feminine” subject position in these documents, since women are consistently conceived of in them either as sexual objects or conduits of wealth. In simpler terms, what could a woman “do” sexually and actively in this context? How was she constructed and interpellated by official proclamations concerning marriage, sex, adultery, and punishment? If the masculine position is sketched out in meticulous detail both in legal texts and in the narrative literature of the period, the role of women is much more difficult to discern and must be described largely in terms of the implications that can be drawn from the delineation of masculinity, which itself is “unthinkable” unless we conceive of it as a “place marker” in a system of gender relations, meaning that the delineation of masculinity as a “project” requires the existence of femininity.² The position of women is unavoidably contingent in these documents: it depends always and everywhere upon its relations with men in order to be understood. Nevertheless, this same statement is true of the masculine subject position: just as an adulterer and a fornicator cannot be defined as such without considering the kind of woman with whom a given man had sexual relations, so a woman in any situation cannot be defined in social and gender terms without considering her own relations to men of differing social statuses. This second, contingent, “feminine” position is complementary to its masculine counterpart, which presupposes the existence of the feminine as a pre-condition for its own existence. In other words, men who were the subjects of an entire legal and intellectual system made explicit in an enormous corpus of documents required both women as the objects of their actions, and the potentiality or threat that men themselves could become objects or victims within this system. Curiously, then, when medieval and Renaissance men looked at the position of women within the legal system meant to codify and institutionalize their own privilege, they saw their own gender reflected back at them in an inverted or “transposed” form, in the musical sense. The possibility that men could be “victimized” by women apparently terrified and fascinated early-modern men, leading to the voluminous comic meditations on this theme that constitute the adultery literature that is my focus here. Moreover, this comic literature seems to explore and to describe the possibility of women’s agency, or better yet its probability and ubiquity, which posed a problem for men that was at the core, I would argue, of both the legal documents I will examine, and of the structuring of masculine subjectivity as well.

A brief if detailed survey of the legal texts at our disposal will give us a clearer idea of how masculinity was structured as a place, process, and project within this enormous intertext. The three necessary figures of the cuckold tale—the watchful, paranoid husband, the uncontrollable wife, and the usurping lover—are also the main characters of official documents that date back thousands of years.

2 The notion of masculinity as a “place marker” and “process” or “project” in a system of gender relations is developed in R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 67–86.