

## ***Translatio Ganymedis: Reading the Sex Out of Ovid in Alan of Lille's *The Complaint of Nature****

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Se negat esse uirum Nature, factus in arte  
Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus.  
Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici.  
In uicium melius ista figura cadit.<sup>1</sup>

[Becoming a barbarian in grammar, [the sodomite] disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition [*translatio*], however, cannot be called a trope. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects [*uicium*, or *vitium*].<sup>2</sup>]

— Alan of Lille, *The Complaint of Nature* (Meter 1, lines 21-24)

Because Scriptural exegesis offered readers the only thing close to a systematic model for textual interpretation during the High Middle Ages, problems arose when Christian readers set out to explicate pagan literature. Unabashed representations of erotic, and particularly homoerotic, desire in the works of Ovid proved to be particularly embarrassing to medieval exegetes seeking to demonstrate the efficacy of Christian allegorical interpretation applied to profane works. Readers found themselves pressed to interpret Ovidian representations of erotic desire as a figure for something else. But is it really possible in this model of reading to evacuate literal sex from the text by making

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1 Alan of Lille, *De planctu Naturae*, ed. Häring, 806.21-807.24. Subsequent page and line references cite this edition.

2 Alan of Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Sheridan, p. 68. Subsequent passages in English translation are taken from this work, with page references indicated.

it a figure, especially given the importance of literal meaning as the grounding, or *fondatio*, of allegorical meaning? Is this use of figuration to evacuate literal sex not itself an abuse or even a perversion of the exegetical process as it was understood to function? Alan of Lille asks this very question in his allegorical work *De planctu Naturae*. For Alan and authors influenced by his work, including Jean de Meun and Chaucer, sodomy comes to name this particular exegetical dilemma. Nature's complaint refers not so much to the existence of sodomites in the world as it does to the representation of sodomy in pagan literature and more precisely to the temptation the Christian reader might feel to make it re-signify. The question of sodomy and the question of reading are virtually inseparable in *De planctu Naturae*. Indeed, sodomy as a discursive category—and along with it Western homophobia—arose out of the discursive practices of medieval Christian exegesis. As Larry Scanlon explains, “Insofar as it imposes a teleology on modes of pleasure, the ideal of a ‘natural’ sexuality is pre-eminently an interpretive or exegetical one.”<sup>3</sup>

In effect, Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae*, more than any other literary work of its time, construes sodomy as inseparable from exegetical discourse. In it, an exegetical problem is presented through an example of pagan representation of same-sex desire while same-sex desire is presented as a dysfunction in allegorical meaning. In my reading of *De planctu Naturae*, I begin to outline what might be called a rhetoric of sodomy, that is, a more or less systematic taxonomy of the tropes associated with sodomy—namely, *metalepsis* and *translatio*—and of their particular function(s) in the works that use them. I claim that the desire of the Christian exegete to read sex out of pagan works produces the spectre of the sodomitic body which comes to figure exegetical dysfunction and ultimately mirrors the reader's desire back to him.

In recent years, a number of scholars have read *De planctu Naturae* with an eye to situating sexuality in relationship to exegetical discourse.<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Leupin's groundbreaking *Barbarolexis* places Alan in a lineage of medieval writers who deliberately highlight the gaps and flaws of referential language in order to bring attention to, rather than veil, the alterity and unrepresentability of desire. He is the first to interpret the rhetorical excesses of *De planctu Naturae* as a deliberately self-reflexive gesture. More importantly, Leupin's method of reading, which takes Alan's own prescribed method and

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3 Scanlon, “Unspeakable Pleasures,” 235.

4 See, for example, Leupin, *Barbarolexis*, especially 59-78; Scanlon, “Unspeakable Pleasures”; Pittenger, “Explicit Ink”; Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*; Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature*; and Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics*.

turns it on itself, reading it against the grain, has marked all subsequent readings, including my own. Mark Jordan's *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, along similar lines, complicates Alan of Lille's rhetorical stance in relation to sodomy. Jordan's argument cautions readers from assuming that *De planctu Naturae* is an invective directed against homosexuals<sup>5</sup> and suggests that Alan might in fact be more concerned with the use or misuse of pagan poetry in Christian theology. While I agree with Jordan, I am also wary of concluding too quickly that Alan's work is concerned only with linguistic or literary abuses.<sup>6</sup> In my view, this critical tendency represents yet another instance of giving in to the temptation to read sodomy as a figure for something else, a reading that I would suggest is already scripted into the text. In her 1996 article on *De planctu Naturae*, Elizabeth Pittenger warns against this: "The problem with generalized notions of 'perversion' and 'language' is that they efface the specificity of the concrete registers triggered by the representations of sexuality and writing in the text, thereby making it difficult for us to conceptualize the erotic materiality of reading."<sup>7</sup> Following Pittenger's articulation of the question, I will argue through a close reading of the representation of Ganymede in *De planctu Naturae* that it is the erotic materiality of reading that both drives medieval readers to allegorize sexual referents and makes this allegoresis ultimately impossible. The pervasive figure of the sodomitic body names the erotic materiality of reading in medieval letters, and in Alan's work it is the sodomitic body of Ganymede that holds this function.

*De planctu Naturae* is a notoriously difficult text. A theological allegory in densely written prosimetry, composed sometime between 1160 and 1180, the work gives voice to a personified Lady Nature arguing in defence of procreative orthodoxy. The work's English translator James Sheridan, who has translated much of Alan's other work, describes the Latin of *De planctu Naturae* as the most difficult he has ever encountered: "Throughout most of the work there are two layers of meaning and in a number of places there are three."<sup>8</sup> Sheridan's complaint refers specifically to the famous sex-grammar metaphors scattered throughout Alan's prose, metaphors which refer, for example,

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5 Jordan is correcting an assumption made by Boswell (in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*), Goodich (in *The Unmentionable Vice*), and to a certain extent also by Scanlon (in "Unspeaking Pleasures").

6 Ziolkowski (in *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex*) and Quilligan (in "Words and Sex") both present strong arguments in favor of the view that *De planctu Naturae* is fundamentally concerned with abuses of language.

7 Pittenger, "Explicit Ink," 225.

8 The discussion appears in the foreword to Sheridan's English translation of *De planctu Naturae*, vii.

to masturbation as a reflexive verb, to bisexuality as a heteroclitite noun, and to copulation between a man and a woman as a subject-verb-predicate construction. While a number of studies make mention of the sex-grammar metaphors in *De planctu Naturae*, Jan Ziolkowski approaches Alan's use of grammatical metaphors most systematically.<sup>9</sup> In the present study I take the body-language comparison, implied by the sex-grammar metaphor, as a starting point. The putative ontological continuity between language and the body, assumed by this comparison, is what enables Alan to refer to same-sex desire as an abuse of both grammatical and rhetorical norms. Whether or not he himself took this ontological continuity as a given, one can see in this comparison the extent to which his conception of same-sex desire was in fact shaped by the exegetical tradition. To be specific, he saw a parallel in the rhetorical conception of the relation between literal and figurative meaning and the theological division of ordered and sodomitic bodies. Sodomitic desire for Alan is a figure for various types of interruptions, short-circuits and failures to ground, in the functioning of allegorical meaning.

In the following section I outline Alan of Lille's use of exegetical terminology, focusing particularly on the ways in which he understood the division of literal and figurative meaning to function. I explain how Alan was able to view sodomy both as an abuse of the literal and as an abuse of the figurative. Finally, I examine a passage in *De planctu Naturae* where the pagan representation of same-sex desire—in this case Ovid's telling of the rape of Ganymede—gives rise to speculation about the power of exegesis to read same-sex desire as a figure for a nobler Christian truth.

Alan's sex-grammar metaphor assumes thorough knowledge of the exegetical tradition, a body of writing that enacted a number of debates concerning the relationship of grammar to rhetoric, and of both grammar and rhetoric to truth. For medieval exegetes, the line between grammar and rhetoric—that is, between the literal and the figurative—was a difficult one to draw. Figurative uses of language were understood as either a transfer (*translatio*) or a turn away from (*tropus*) proper meaning. A *translatio* or *tropus* could either be classified as a figure of speech (*figura*) or a grammatical error

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9 The present paper is much indebted to Ziolkowski's *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex*, which explains in great depth the exegetical tradition Alan was influenced by and part of. Ziolkowski argues that Alan's elaborate use of grammatical and rhetorical terms had a pedagogical function and that these grammatical metaphors took on an ethical dimension. See also Pittenger, who discusses the coincidence of grammatical metaphors and sexual regulation at length, as in the following passage: "Normative prescriptions find alliance in metaphors of reading and writing perhaps because the context of pedagogical instruction allows for a particularly potent linking of technical orthographics to what might be imagined as an ethical 'orthopedics.'" Pittenger, "Explicit Ink," 229.

(*vitium*), depending on one's interpretation. It becomes an error on the grounds that it is an abuse of the proper, while a successful figure, although an abuse of the proper all the same, is justified on the grounds of its utility and truth-value. If a *translatio* attains the status of *figura* it becomes the concern of rhetoricians, but if it fails and falls into the category of *vitium* it is the concern of grammarians. In theory, the grammarian is concerned with the proper (proper meaning/the properties of a part of speech) while the rhetorician is more concerned with questions of use-value—to what end is this figure being used?—and truth-value—is there a deeper truth behind the untruth at the surface of the *translatio*?

Figurative uses of language, even when justified, always threaten to become ends in themselves, which will lead the reader astray. Only proper uses of language—in other words, literal, non-figurative, non-catachretic modes of reference—would seem to guarantee unequivocal truth. But as Henri de Lubac's monumental study of medieval exegesis explains, the literal mode of reference, comfotingly straightforward as it may have been, was considered dangerous if mistaken for an end unto itself:

Under the name “letter,” in a language that Saint Paul had fixed, the Christian therefore rejects and ought to reject not every “literal sense,” but, once again, the “mere letter,” or the “naked history,” the letter whose keeping would equivalently be the rejection of the larger meaning. [...]

If it is a question of practice, the letter that is rejected is that of carnal observances.<sup>10</sup>

De Lubac demonstrates in fact that the letter might have been more problematic than the figure in the medieval exegetical tradition because the letter was associated with the body of Christ, which, if kept at the level of the “mere letter,” would come to index nothing more than “carnal observances.” As such, the literal dimension of a text would reference materiality and embodiment, thus being marked feminine. If Scripture were to fall into the wrong hands and interpretation were to remain at the “mere letter,” or the “naked history,” or if the text in question were, for instance, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the reader might be capable of producing nothing more than mere flesh, body without spirit.

Therefore, the allegorical referent must signify properly on the literal register in a first step on the way to figurative signification. It must first be posited as a referent that can be named and denoted transparently before it can become an allegorical signifier. If it fails to refer transparently or if the reader fails to move beyond the literal

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<sup>10</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2: 54-55.

meaning, the literal referent becomes an end in itself. While the literal had to serve as foundation for the figurative, the figurative had to depart from, or disengage from, the literal. In other words, the literal and the figurative were acknowledged to be of altogether different orders, to be absolutely incommensurable. As de Lubac puts it, “the order of the spirit [i.e., the figurative] *founded upon* history [i.e., the literal] and *disengaged from* history.”<sup>11</sup>

Both the literal and the figurative dimensions of the text provoke anxiety in their capacity to go awry if ever made ends in themselves. Figurative uses of language, as deviations from proper meaning, must be justified as means to some higher end or else they become abuses of the proper simply for the sake of abuse. Literal uses of language, although adherent to proper meaning, threaten to mire the reader in the pleasures of the flesh if taken for ends in themselves. Each level of meaning (be it literal or figurative) threatens to become an end in itself. Fallen into the wrong hands, for example, the erotic love represented in the Song of Songs becomes nothing more than erotic love: its capacity to teach, its truth-claim as Scripture, is interrupted by the exclusively literal interpretation. One can only imagine, then, how problematic it must have been to make literal representations of erotic love from pagan works have meaning for Christian readers. Readers trained in Scriptural exegesis were not able to rely on a long established tradition of allegorical interpretation (as they could with the Song of Songs) when confronted with candid representations of sexuality in the writings of Ovid and Virgil. If Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is to be a Christian allegory—and most of it does lend itself to effortless allegorical interpretation—representations of non-normative desire would have to be evacuated by being made figures for something else.

Sodomitic desire—that is, homoerotic and other disordered desires—arises primarily as an exegetical dilemma for Alan of Lille. He articulates the question of sodomitic desire in relation to the anxiety that the literal and the figurative provoke in their capacity to become ends in themselves. To be precise, sodomitic desire arises as a figure both for ungrounded and interrupted allegorical meaning in *De planctu Naturae*, always appearing at moments when the interrelationship of literal and figurative meaning is placed explicitly into question.

To begin with, sodomy is an abuse of the literal, an abuse of “proper” meaning. As the “sin against nature,” sodomy not only offends Nature, but also has a denaturing effect on mankind. That sodomy denatures man is another way of saying that sodomy is an abuse of the proper, that it turns man away from man’s proper meaning. Philosoph-

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11 De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2: 82; emphasis mine.

ical and theological notions of the natural, especially allegorical personifications of nature, are connected to grammatical notions of the proper in medieval writing. Lady Nature hence becomes the guardian of proper meaning and the “sin against nature,” by extension, an abuse of the proper.

The sodomite betrays the proper meaning of *man* by denying reproduction and thus his animal-corporeal nature. A violation of animal nature (i.e., the teleology of the body) was tantamount to a violation of the literal. According to the logic of allegorical meaning—which requires the literal to function transparently before it can have figurative meaning—man cannot have spiritual meaning without first fulfilling his literal (i.e., corporeal) meaning. If man denies his animal nature he cannot fulfill his spiritual nature.

If *man* fails to signify literally, the stability of the sign *man/man* (signifier/signified) can no longer be guaranteed. In the context of medieval sign theory, which assumed one-to-one correspondence between signified and signifier, any abuse of the proper will affect the continuity between language and nature, between language and being. In medieval neoplatonic thought, of which Alan is exemplary, the notion of “nature” provided a way for being as such to be thought. A violation of nature was ultimately a violation of being. The literal dimension of a text was the concern of grammarians, whose task was to establish a solid foundation for the revelation of truth by assuring locatable and stable correspondence between signifieds and signifiers, between the elements of nature and the elements of language. As John of Salisbury says in his *Metalogicon*, “grammar prepares the mind to understand everything that can be taught in words.”<sup>12</sup> This *everything* John writes of encompasses all of nature—all that can be known in the simplest deictic mode of speech. Language in the literal mode participated in the same order of being as the natural world, while language in the figurative mode was thought to be able to designate divine matters, but not able to participate in the same order of being as things divine. In his *Summa* “*Quoniam homines*,” Alan explains,

Item dictiones ideo invente sunt ad significandum naturalia; postea ad theologiam translate. Itaque secundum primam institutionem naturalia designant, secundum vero translationem divina significant. Itaque naturalibus proprie, divinis vero inproprie conveniunt.

[Similarly, words are for that reason invented in order to signify natural things and are only afterward transferred [*translate*] to theology. Thus in accordance with their first

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12 John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, 60.

application they designate natural matters, while in accordance with metaphoric transference [*translationem*] they signify divine matters. Thus they are properly serviceable for natural matters, but on the contrary improperly for divine ones.<sup>13</sup>

When Alan refers to words (*dictiones*) in the last sentence, he makes it clear that the meaning of “words” does not include words whose meaning has been transferred figuratively. Thus, when he says “words are only properly serviceable for natural matters,” Alan refers exclusively to the proper meaning of words. Figurative language does not count as *words* because it has denatured words in order to signify divine matters while words, as long as they signify properly, participate within the natural world and are hence ontologically continuous with it. *Translatio* is thus a trope concerned with being. Notions of the proper in medieval rhetoric always reference a certain adherence to being, while notions of *translatio* reference a—sometimes necessary, but always dangerous—breaking away from or violation of being.

It is exactly this kind of perilous violation of being that is at stake in the highly improper and abusive *translatio* of meaning that sodomy names. One particularly salient description of sodomy as an abusive *translatio* of the proper meaning of man can be found in Paul of Hungary’s *Summa of Penance*.<sup>14</sup> In a poetic depiction, he describes the properties of the waters of Sodom and Gomorrah: a piece of iron will float to the surface of the water while a feather will sink to the bottom. Paul’s floating iron and sinking feather describe the effect *translatio* has on proper meaning. What is proper to iron is to sink, and what is proper to feathers is to float; but mere proximity to the burnt-out city of Sodom causes the iron and feathers to betray their *properties*, their proper meaning. Paul’s choice of light/heavy for the properties violated by sodomitic abuse of the proper is rhetorically powerful, since the light/heavy opposition references the opposition between up and down, between the heavens and the earth. To ignore the hierarchy of up and down is essentially to violate the fundamental order of being. The sodomitic image of floating iron and sinking feathers is an example of this violation of being, a violation of being which disrupts the order of the natural world—specifically, that most fundamental order separating the above from the below.

But in addition to being an abusive *translatio* that threatens the capacity of words to adhere to things via proper meaning, *sodomy* also names an incorrect “use” of body and language. This abusive “use” of body and language calls into question the teleology

13 Alan of Lille, *Summa* “*Quoniam homines*,” 141. Translation is Ziolkowski’s, in *Alan of Lille’s Grammar of Sex*, 129.

14 Qtd. in Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, 100.



of both body and language. To return to the description of sodomy as the “sin against nature,” it is important to remember that Alan draws from a tradition dating back to Paul in which “the sin against nature” is described as an *usus*, a word whose meaning bridges the rhetorical and the corporeal. Paul refers to same-sex desire specifically as the “usu[s] qui est contra naturam.”<sup>15</sup> One of the word’s primary meanings is *custom* or *habit*, a notion that has both a rhetorical and a corporeal aspect to it. In classical and medieval rhetoric *usus* describes the positing of meaning in certain grammatical propositions—the word often appears in evaluations of figurative language: *is this an abusive “use” of metaphor or is it justified?* Implicit in this idea of proper use, both in terms of sex and grammar, is a cause/effect structure. To say that a sexual act or a grammatical proposition must be useful is to say that the body or language must be a means to an end, and not an end unto itself. This kind of logic is commonplace in the theological writings concerning “the sin against nature.” Aquinas exploits it thoroughly in his *Summa*, as Jordan demonstrates:

For Thomas, true pleasure is the effect of natural completion, of the fulfillment of natural teleology. The Sodomitic vice radically disrupts the most obvious continuities of animal nature. Yet the cause of this violently antinatural sin is the intensity of the pleasure it yields—a pleasure so intense that it “dissolves the soul.” But it is not only the intensity that is troubling: Thomas here confronts a kind of pleasure that cannot be divided without remainder into teleological sequences. He confronts a pleasure without end. He names the possibility of this pleasure the antithesis of nature.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, for Thomas, sodomy is disruptive because it brings about a pleasure that cannot be subsumed to any system of meaning. A “pleasure without end” describes pleasure that does not have procreation as its end, pleasure that has become an end in itself. This formulation has a parallel in the disciplines of rhetoric and dialectic, which view the teleology of meaning in the same way Thomas views the teleology of pleasure. Rhetorical terminology uses the term *metalepsis* to describe precisely the violation of the teleology of means/end that Thomas describes sodomy as bringing about. *Metalepsis* is defined as the logical error of taking the means for the end, which can sometimes be used for rhetorical effect, but which most of the time simply constitutes a flaw in reasoning. *Metaleptic* tropes are often used to describe sodomy in theological and poetic writing of

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15 Rom. 1:26 Vulg. “propterea tradidit illos Deus in passiones ignominiae nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam.”

16 Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, 155-56.

the Middle Ages. The description of sodomy as metalepsis can be found in Paul of Hungary's *Summa of Penance*. In his poetic depiction of the waters of Sodom and Gomorrah, Paul describes the shore of these waters where he finds trees bearing apples that are appealing to look at, but are either filled with ashes or disappear or explode at the touch.

These beautiful but inedible apples are the image of metalepsis. Here, the apple's beauty has become an end in itself. An apple's beauty should be the cause for it to be eaten, and being eaten, the final effect. If beauty is taken as an end in itself, then the apple's purpose, its teleology, is ignored. The beautiful but inedible apples of Sodom are the image of cause mistaken for effect. Correspondingly, the sodomite mistakes sex for an end in itself, ignoring the teleology of reproduction. Or as Jordan puts it, sodomy takes pleasure as an end in itself, becoming a "pleasure without end" that cannot be parsed into teleological sequences. Sodomites are guilty of a metaleptic flaw of reasoning.

In the rhetorical terms I have been using—which Alan exploits fully—it is specifically the abuse of figurative language (*vitium*, or "vice") that is conceived in metaleptic terms. Donatus defines *vitium*, using a means/end formulation, as a "deviatio a fine. . . sine causa excusante" (deviation in effect without justifiable cause).<sup>17</sup> It goes one step beyond the abuse of the proper discussed above. While *translatio* can be justified if it is to the end of revealing divine truth, deviation from proper meaning—when it has no purpose other than the pleasure of deviation itself—becomes an abuse of the very system of meaning that allows it. It is according to these terms that Alan's narrator is able to denounce sodomy as a defective trope, as he does in the opening meter section of *De planctu*:

Se negat esse uirum Nature, factus in arte  
Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus.  
Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici.  
In uicium melius ista figura cadit.<sup>18</sup>

[Becoming a barbarian in grammar, he disclaims the manhood given him by nature. Grammar does not find favour with him but rather a trope. This transposition [*translatio*], however, cannot be called a trope. The figure here more correctly falls into the category of defects [*uicium*].]

The narrator here refers to sodomy as a defective trope that fails even to qualify as a trope in the end. The sodomite slips out of grammar, out of the literal into the figura-

<sup>17</sup> Ziolkowski, *Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *De planctu*, meter 1, ll. 21-24. Häring 806.21-807.24. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 68.

tive, first as a trope, but finally arriving at the status of *vitium* (literally “vice”). The slip-page Alan’s narrator depicts here in fact corresponds neatly to the two abuses described above in relation to sodomy. The sodomite first abuses grammar by dislocating the literal (i.e., the proper) meaning of man. This abuse, a *translatio*, brings him into the figurative dimension of language. But as Alan writes, the sodomite cannot even properly be called a figure because he fails to perform as a figure is supposed to according to the exegetical model, which subsumes figurative language to the teleology of Christian truth. Not pointing to any truth beyond his own dislocation of proper meaning, the sodomite becomes an end in itself, not a figure but a *vitium*, the very definition of metalepsis.

Given this understanding of the sodomite as a *vitium*, it is not surprising that the spectre of sodomitic desire resurfaces once again in the midst of a debate regarding allegorical interpretation. In Prose Four, Lady Nature continues the pedagogical dialogue begun in Prose Three. After hearing Nature elaborate an exhaustive taxonomy of sexual perversions, the narrator wonders why she focused her attack on humanity if the poets have also represented the gods practising sexual sins against nature:

Miror cur poetarum commenta retractans, solummodo in humani generis pestes predictarum iniectionum armas aculeos, cum et eodem exorbitationis pede deos claudicasse legamus.<sup>19</sup>

[I wonder why, when you consider the statements of the poets, you load the stings of the above attacks against the contagions of the human race alone, although we read that the gods too, have limped around the same circle of aberration.]

He follows with the Ovidian example of the rape of Ganymede, which he retells, describing Ganymede’s abduction as a *translatio*:

Iupiter enim, adolescentem Frigium *transferens* ad superna, relatiuam Venerem *transtulit* in *translatum*. Et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi prefecit propositum, in thoro per noctem sibi fecit suppositum.<sup>20</sup>

[Jupiter, translating the Phrygian youth to the realms above, transferred there a proportionate love for him on his transference. The one he had made his wine-master by day he made his subject in bed by night.]

Nature responds by accusing the narrator of taking the poets at face value, of reading too literally. This launches Nature into her frequently quoted discourse on the question

19 *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 836.115-17. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 138.

20 *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 836.117-837.120; emphasis mine. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 138-39.

of poetic truth. All poetry, because it is a *translatio* of proper meaning, is a kind of lie, she claims. But poetic lies occur in three different modalities, which readers must learn to distinguish from one another: a purely denotative modality, a falsely denotative modality, and a figurative modality. She explains,

An ignoras quomodo poete sine omni palliationis remedio auditoribus nudam falsitatem prostituunt, ut quadam mellite delectationis dulcedine uelut incantatas audientium aures inebrient? Aut ipsam falsitatem quadam probabilitatis ypocrisi palliant, ut per exemplorum imagines hominum animos inhoneste morigerationis incude sigillent? Aut in superficiali littere cortice falsum resonat lira poetica, interius uero auditoribus secretum intelligentie altioris eloquitur, ut exteriori falsitatis abiecto putamine dulciorem nucleum ueritatis secrete intus lector inueniat.<sup>21</sup>

[Do you not know how the poets present falsehood, naked and without the protection of a covering, to their audience so that by a certain sweetness of honeyed pleasure, they may, so to speak, intoxicate the bewitched ears of their hearers? Or, how they cover falsehood with a kind of imitation of probability so that, by a presentation of precedents, they may seal the minds of men with a stamp from the anvil of shameful tolerance? Or, how the poetic lyre gives a false note on the outer bark of the composition but within tells the listeners a secret of deeper significance so that when the outer shell of falsehood has been discarded the reader finds the sweeter kernel of truth hidden within?]

Thus there are three kinds of lies in poetry: first, lies presented in the literal mode (naked lies), which seduce because of something intrinsic in the lie represented; secondly, lies covered in false figures, which seduce in their figurative aspect, but which remain lies nonetheless; and thirdly, truth covered in figures, which are only lies insofar as figures must dislocate proper meaning in order to reveal another order of truth.

The gist of her argument is that it is important to understand that poetry has both a surface meaning (literal) and a depth meaning (figurative), which often (perhaps always) betray one another. It is up to the reader to decide whether there is more truth at the surface of the text or beneath the surface. This argument is crucial because it justifies Alan's own use of a poetic allegory—highly reliant on classical poetic models and pagan allegory—for the purposes of theological argumentation. But what needs to be underscored here is that this canonically important theoretical moment in *De planctu Naturae*, in which a rather comprehensive theory of poetic truth is articulated, itself follows a question about the pagan representation of same-sex desire. Given that it is presented as a response to a question about the representation of same-

21 *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 837.128-36. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 139-40.

sex desire, can Nature's theory of poetic truth account for this representation? In other words, can pagan representations of same-sex desire have meaning for the Christian theologian?

While Nature's discourse on poetic truth calls the truth-value of the pagan poets and any secular poetry into question, it does not answer the question whether this particular Ovidian scene—the representation of same-sex desire that spurs her theory—can have meaning for Christians. She does not declare whether it is possible to read these scenes allegorically. While she warns the narrator about the three varieties of poetic falsehood, Nature does not explain what specific kind of poetic falsehood the story of Jupiter and Ganymede constitutes. Is it one of the first two kinds, designed either to seduce or to trick the reader into committing sin? Or is it the third kind, a poetic lie that hides a deeper truth beneath the surface of its figurative artifice? Nature seems to suggest the latter—first, to the extent that she often uses Ovidian examples herself to bolster her arguments and, second, in that she insists on the dangers of literal reading, which can be remedied only by reading allegorically. This is clearest in the conclusion of her discourse:

Quia ergo, ut poete testati sunt, plerique homines predicamentilibus Veneris terminis ad litteram sunt abusi, narratio uero illa, que uel deos esse uel ipsos in Veneris gignasiis lasciuisse mentitur, in nimie falsitatis uesperascit occasum; ista nube taciturnitatis obdusi, illa uero in lucem uere narrationis explicui.<sup>22</sup>

[Because then, many men, as we know from the testimony of the poets, have misused, *by a literal interpretation*, the terms applied to Venus, this account of theirs which falsely states that there is a plurality of gods or that these gods have wantoned in the playgrounds of Venus [...]. Over these statements [the literal interpretation] I draw the cloud of silence, the ones preceding them [Christian truth] I unfold to the light of truthful narrative.]

Nature draws a cloud of silence over the literal interpretation of the pagan poets because the literal is corporeal, of the same order as animal nature, which is mute. It is only through *explicatio*<sup>23</sup> (literally “unfolding,” “revealing to view”) that the light of Christian truth can be revealed in this poetry. Through Nature's *explicatio*, pagan poetry goes from a cloud of silence (“nube taciturnitatis”) to the light of truthful narrative (“lucem uere narrationis”), from falsehood to truth. What is at stake is the possibility

22 *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 838.150-54. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 141; emphasis mine.

23 See the entry on *explico* in the OLD: “1. To free from folds [...] 2. To extricate [...] 3. To disentangle [...] 7. To reveal to view; to make clear (to the understanding) [...] 8. To make known or set out in words, give an account of, unfold.”

for figurative language to transfer meaning, from the literal signification of same-sex desire to a nobler allegorical signification. But the question remains—is there an allegorical truth hidden beneath the apparent falsehood at the surface of the story of Ganymede’s *translatio*? And further, what specific allegorical message would the rape of Ganymede hold for Christian readers of Ovid?

Alan, at least, does have an allegorical interpretation of Jupiter and Ganymede in mind. As indicated above, the word choice in the narrator’s description of the scene is conspicuous. He uses words such as *transfer/translatum* (metaphor, transposition, transfer), *suppositum* (having been placed beneath or subjoined both physically and in writing or speech), *propositum* (having been placed in front of both physically and in writing or speech, proposed, stated as fact) and *relativam* (brought back, reciprocal, recalled in speech or writing by similarity) to describe the relationship between Jupiter and Ganymede, words which, in addition to having a straightforward physical-literal meaning, have a clear meaning in the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. Since Nature accuses him of reading too literally, one can assume that the narrator intended *translatio* in its most literal-corporeal sense as a physical displacement of Ganymede’s body from the earth to the heavens. Nature’s theory of poetic falsehood can thus be read as a response to the double meaning of those words that refer literally to the displacement of Ganymede’s body, but figuratively to various rhetorical manoeuvres. The allegorical meaning of the story was hidden in the figurative meaning of these seemingly corporeal words, a figurative meaning to which the narrator was blind because he could not see beyond the veil of the body, beyond the literal dimension. This is all the more criminal since the “figurative” meaning is in fact part of these words’ proper meaning. The words refer “properly” to various rhetorical and grammatical functions, and the conspicuous emphasis on *translatio* leads one to suspect that the allegorical interpretation of Ganymede will have something to do with the very workings of figurative language.<sup>24</sup> The double meaning of *translatio*, and the particularity of that doubleness, suggests that the story of Ganymede can be read as an allegory of interpretation, that is, as a representation through poetic artifice of the doubleness of the allegorical text split between its surface and depth meaning.

With this in mind I cite the passage here once again, in order to determine what such an allegorical interpretation might look like.

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24 In the narrator’s retelling *transfer/translatum* replaces the verb Ovid uses (“abripit,” *Metamorphoses*, 10: 160) to describe the kidnapping of Ganymede.

Jupiter enim, adolescentem Frigium *transferens* ad superna, *relatiuam* Venerem *transtulit* in *translatum*. Et quem in mensa per diem propinandi sibi prefecit *propositum*, in thoro per noctem sibi fecit *suppositum*.<sup>25</sup>

[Jupiter, translating the Phrygian youth to the realms above, transferred there a proportionate love for him on his transference. The one he had made his wine-master by day he made his subject in bed by night.]

Ganymede has a double structure. The verb *transfero/translatum* functions as a sort of switch-between: he is “transferred” from earth to the heavens; Jupiter “transfers” his love to an equivalent love for Ganymede; his function is “transferred” from day to night, and Jupiter “transfers” him from an active role (*propositum*) to a passive one (*suppositum*), from the public realm to the private, from wine-boy to lover. The doubleness of Ganymede—both active and passive, earthly and divine, diurnal and nocturnal, wine-master and sex slave—imitates the doubled structure of a text that has both a literal and figurative meaning. Like the literal dimension of a text, which reveals truth only through the interpretive effort of figural reading, earthly Ganymede must be “transferred,” through an elevation upward, in order for the divine Jupiter to be able to possess him. For this reason, the most important *translatio* Ganymede undergoes is the move from earth to the heavens (*transferens ad superna*), from the earthly to the divine. Just as Nature creates a binary distinction—inside/outside, veiled/unveiled—in her discussion of literal and figurative meaning, the use of the word *supernus* (literally “above,” “heavens”) places Ganymede in an above/below binary which imitates the relation of the literal to the figurative.

As for the words *propositum* and *suppositum*, which are used to describe Ganymede’s two tasks as both wine-boy and lover, they too have a rhetorical meaning in addition to a physical one. Moreover, the way they are set in contrast here suggests one might read these words as referencing literal and figurative meaning. *Propositum* refers to Ganymede’s “placement” as Jupiter’s wine-master, but another common meaning of “proponere” is “to put on display.”<sup>26</sup> As Henri de Lubac and others have argued, the literal meaning of a text was associated with the immediately visible in the medieval imagination.<sup>27</sup> The

25 *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 836.117-837.120; emphasis mine. *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 138-39.

26 Elsewhere in *De planctu*, Alan uses the words *appositum*, *suppositum*, and *propositum* as grammatical terms referring to various modes of subordination in a phrase.

27 De Lubac writes that “The old etymology of *historia* had been recorded by Saint Isidore of Seville, whose *Etymologiae* enjoyed an extreme popularity for centuries: ‘History’ is derived from the Greek *hístōrein*, i.e., to see and get to know; for no one among the ancients used to write a history, except for one who had been there.... For we grasp what happens better with the eyes than we gather it by hearing.” De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2: 43.

literal meaning was that aspect of a text which is put on display. Ganymede, as Jupiter's wine-master is a public figure, put on display in the wine-hall ("in mensa . . . propinandi"), in full daylight ("per diem"), visible and knowable to all by virtue of his task. But this aspect of Ganymede's existence is only the surface beneath which his true task, and truest meaning, is secretly hidden. To this extent, Ganymede's *propositum* references the literal dimension of a text which is visible and knowable to all but which hides secret truths that require one to "transfer" its meaning to another level. *Suppositum* refers to Ganymede's subjection (literally "placement beneath") to Jupiter in bed. The above/beneath binary here references the relation of literal to figurative meaning. Figurative meaning is always hidden, veiled beneath the flesh of the literal meaning, which must be unveiled to reveal the figurative meaning. Thus allegorically, Ganymede's doubleness—having been placed simultaneously above and beneath—comes to signify the paradoxically simultaneous existence of literal and figurative meaning in one signifier. But if the doubleness of Ganymede allegorizes the dual levels in the allegorical text, how then should one read the abduction or *translatio* that Jupiter operates, a *translatio* that accounts for this very doubleness?

In their relationship, Ganymede is a kind of textual object whose meaning gets transferred (*translatum*) through the arbitration of a powerful *auctor* (Jupiter). As the god of gods, Jupiter has the power to "translate" Ganymede from a mortal to an immortal being, to raise him from one order of being to another. Jupiter the lover thus becomes a figure for the reader of allegory, invested with divine authority. The figure of Jupiter as lover/reader posits the reader as an active subject whose reading enacts a *translatio* upon the passive literal dimension of the text. Jupiter's love for, and action upon, Ganymede would thus come, allegorically, to signify a certain encounter between reader and text. This encounter would be here allegorized as driven by love and desire: the reader, like Jupiter, "loves" the text so much that he is driven to "lift" or translate its literal meaning into a "higher" meaning. The rape of Ganymede would, in other words, bring to the foreground the desire that propels even the most Christian of allegorical interpretation: the desire to "abduct" that is, to lift up and elevate the literal meaning into a "higher" one. What allows this elevation to take place?

Jupiter, out of love, translates Ganymede's body, from earth to heaven, from the wine hall to the bedroom, from day to night, from wine-boy to lover, from active to passive. In each of these transfers, Ganymede is the direct object of the verb. The passage makes it clear that Jupiter is driven to transfer Ganymede's body by his love, which is itself the direct object of a *translatio*, having been transferred onto Ganymede's body—"relatium Venerem transtulit" (he transferred [to Ganymede] proportionate



love).<sup>28</sup> Thus, two “transfers” occur: one of Ganymede’s body and one onto Ganymede’s body. As Sheridan reads it in his English translation of *De planctu Naturae*, Jupiter translates his love from heterosexual to homosexual love, from Juno to Ganymede as though they were equivalent. But the textual logic of this passage, which invites allegorical reading, requires the reader to account more scrupulously for the adjective *relativam*, which modifies Jupiter’s love. The verb form *refero* has several meanings, including: “to return,” “to bring back,” “to repeat,” and “to call to mind by similarity” among other things, which makes it possible to read “relativam Venerem,” as meaning a love that was (for) the same. *Relativam*, here, would refer in fact to the sameness in their same-sex desire. Jupiter thus “translates” Ganymede because he is driven by a desire for sameness. If the scene functions as an allegory of allegory, as I am suggesting it does, then what does Jupiter’s love tell us about the desire that drives the uplifting movement of allegorical interpretation?

Jupiter’s love for Ganymede is described as qualitatively different from his other extramarital loves. While the women he seduces are beautiful things he wishes to possess, Ganymede is described as a beautiful thing Jupiter wishes to be. His love for Ganymede is a question of being, not having. As Ovid’s version tells it, Ganymede was someone Jupiter wanted to be: “quod Iuppiter esse, / quam quod erat, mallet” (whom Jupiter wanted to *be* more than what he *was*).<sup>29</sup> In Ovid’s version, which Alan clearly knew well, sameness is articulated in concretely ontological terms as an identification. Loving someone of the same sex involves an identification of some sort, which might follow such varied formulas as “I am like him” or “I want to be like him” or even “that is me.” Identification is at the core of the mechanics of metaphor, which must posit an identification before a transfer of meaning can succeed. In the narrator’s retelling of the Ovidian story, Jupiter’s love-for-the-same, having been “transferred” onto Ganymede’s body, impels him to “transfer” Ganymede’s body to the heavens. This mimics the structure of metaphor, which necessitates the *translatio* of identification—what is often referred to as a connecting bridge of metaphor—as a condition for the *translatio* of meaning that characterizes metaphor. In other words, allegorical reading is always predicated on a moment of identification. In *this* allegory of allegorical interpretation, Jupiter, the masterful reader, must identify with Ganymede, must love only in the way same can love same, in order to transfer or translate Ganymede’s meaning/essence.

This would seem to suggest a complete, successful allegorical interpretation of the Ovidian representation of same-sex desire. The sex between them would come to

<sup>28</sup> *De planctu*, prose 4. Häring 836.118; *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Metamorphoses*, 10: 156-57.

figure the encounter between a reader and a text, one that necessitates a passive/active structure. And the sameness between them would come to figure the necessary identification, the passion for sameness that drives allegorical interpretation and which alone enables the allegorical reader to elevate the literal meaning by invoking its similarity with a higher, nobler meaning. Same-sex desire would figure the metaphorical bridge upon which allegorical interpretation relies in order to ennoble meaning.

But something very strange happens when the reader tries to turn the representation of same-sex desire, through a conscious effort of allegorical interpretation, into an allegory of interpretation. The very gesture of interpreting the rape of Ganymede as an allegory of reading necessitates an identification. The very effort to read sodomy as a figure requires the reader to target a point of identification. But the only figure with which the Christian allegorical reader can identify is Jupiter, that is, a sodomite. The story of Ganymede, in other words, brings the reader closer to Jupiter and implicitly closer to same-sex desire. The allegory's self-reflexive structure traps the reader, who attempts to convert sodomy into a figure, in a mode of reading that looks suspiciously sodomitic. Like Jupiter, he must acknowledge that he is driven by a desire for the same that drives him to transfer meaning from one term to another.

Although Christian readers may have tried to dispense with same-sex desire by reading it as a figure for a nobler truth, the only figural reading they can provide turns same-sex desire into a figure for reading, a sort of mirror which, far from evacuating desire, *highlights* it. Same-sex desire, even when read figurally, can only figure and send back the sodomitic quality of allegorical reading itself. Moreover, the figural reading of same-sex desire points to no truth beyond the truth of this sodomitic quality of reading. It is, in this sense, a failed or defective figure which can never succeed in pointing to a truth beyond the effort of interpretation itself. Sodomy will always fail as a figure because it mirrors the sameness necessary to figuration and short-circuits the teleology of meaning, which requires figures to point beyond their own working.

Aware of this aporia, Alan of Lille used the paradox of a regulatory Lady Nature to bring his readers to it. This paradox, I would suggest, accounts for the dizzying sense of referential slippage in the allegory. Alan does not target readers tempted by the sin of sodomy but works to illustrate the particular aporia that arises from the attempt to read sex as a figure for something else. On the one hand, *De planctu Naturae* represents a warning against this perverse enterprise of reading the sex out of pagan literature, while, on the other hand, Alan's work represents a florid, even pleasurable, elaboration of sodomy's unique power to name the erotic materiality of language. At this point it is important to recall that Nature's advice to the narrator, and to anyone faced with this

aporia, is to flee. Yet the narrator does not flee. He chooses instead to enter the desirous labyrinth of reading and to risk perversion and perdition. And it is precisely to the extent that it takes the reader into this labyrinth that one might claim *De planctu Naturae* as a queer text.

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