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# *Queering Francis*

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## abstract

This paper will analyse the process of the creation of an original script and a short performance focused on the relationship between the Catholic figure of Francis of Assisi and the body, as framed by queer theory. Over the centuries and in various cultures, the Catholic institution has been a body of oppression, particularly to minorities. On the other hand, the institution has produced a significant number of figures who were resilient and who have defied the system, both internally and externally. Frequently, these figures are depicted in a tame manner, so that they are seen in a more conservative and orthodox light. Francis of Assisi is one of these figures. Particularly in and after the administration of the Order under Bonaventure, Franciscanism developed in a way that the image of the Poverello was manipulated and softened down. By returning to the pre-Bonaventure documents on the saint, and reflecting on them through queer theory, this project attempts to show the defiant traits of this saint, particularly in the way how he perceived and related with the body and physicality, including deformation. This presents a liberated approach to the body and queers the way how the body has been oppressed both by the Institution, which suppresses the body, as well as by society, that celebrates only select body forms. The second part of the paper 'translates' into practice the theoretical framework through a case-study of a theatrical project.

## keywords

religion, queer studies, queer performance

Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226) is one of the most popular religious figures, esteemed and admired both within and outside the Christian world. His environmental values, as well as his radical lifestyle based on poverty and fraternity, have inspired numerous persons coming from a myriad of different realities. Next to Sebastian, Francis of Assisi can also be considered as one of the queerest saints in the Catholic tradition. According to the Franciscan scholar Kevin Elphick, "St. Francis is a uniquely gender-bending historic figure" and "the gender-bending St. Francis has already spoken through the ages to the LGBT community" (2013). Queer author Kittredge Cherry reinforces this statement by saying that Francis' "extravagant love crossed boundaries" (2021).

Referring to a Medieval figure as queer undoubtedly calls for caution. Queering the Middle Ages does not imply that the historical figure is homosexual. The notion of homosexuality as understood in contemporary society was not perceivable in Medieval culture. Furthermore, Medieval society did not sexualise matters in the same manner as they are sexualised in the twenty-first century. Queering the

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Middle Ages, however, investigates, challenges and deconstructs Medieval sexuality, keeping in mind that we are examining a period of time with all the knowledge and the cultural paradigms that ensued in the subsequent centuries (Karras, 2017: 11, 20). It also offers a tool that examines the power dynamics of a patriarchal system in which minorities were ousted and oppressed. In queering the Middle Ages, we are using a contemporary lens in order to unpack dynamics of power, particularly those affiliated with gender and sexuality, in order to reclaim the latter.

In his hagiographies of the saint, Thomas of Celano[1] provides various episodes and examples that depict Francis as unique and rebellious. These hagiographies will serve as the basis of this research project, not only on the grounds that they were the first and original hagiographies that we know of, but furthermore, because they precede Bonaventure's attempt to present a standardised life account, which sought to depict Francis in a more conventional manner, as a man who undergoes a journey from being a weak person, at times presented as feminine, to serving as the strong male founder of the Franciscan Order (Bynum, 1991: 35). To attain this objective, Bonaventure also commanded the eradication of prior works on the life of the saint (Le Goff, 1999: 23-24; Fo, 2009: ix). Even though still problematic within the context of this study, since it depicts the more moderate side of Franciscanism (Le Goff, 1999: 25-26), Thomas nonetheless shows how the distinctiveness of Francis was misunderstood by his contemporaries, and how frequently he experienced affliction due to the fact that the society he lived in was not willing to accept difference. For example, in portraying the conversion of Francis, Thomas describes the reaction of the residents of Assisi when they encounter the changed man: “Shouting out that he was mad and demented, they threw the mud of the streets and stones at him” (I: I: V: 11)[2]. Through the contemporary lens, in this portrayal Francis can be read as queer, that is, a figure who transgressed the norms of the social and political system embedded in patriarchy. Ranging from frequent references to Francis as mother[3], to his renunciation of the traditional and biological family (I: I: VI: 15), the Poverello defied structures that were strongly ingrained in the social infrastructure. Thus, I would argue that Francis is a queer saint who also queers society through his actions.

This paper will focus on how Francis queered the notion of the body by referring to episodes in his life, and by understanding these bold experiences within the Christian Medieval framework, where body markings “were culturally laden” (Green, 2014: 160), and where society was rigidly structured in a complex web of interdependency (Melnick and Wood, 2005: 67-68). Francis will be displayed as a person who challenges the power dynamics that are associated with physicality and physical expression. These insights will be juxtaposed against the works of

seminal theorists in queer theory, thus demonstrating that the queering of Francis is still pertinent for the society that we are living in, and that queer Francis has still much to tell us. Queer theory questions identity and also opposes political and social approaches in which "normatives are kept in place through associations between binary oppositions" (Barker and Scheele, 2016: 97). Hence, in the context of this paper queer theory will not limit itself to issues and dynamics pertaining to sexuality and gender. The second part of the paper will show how the findings of this study were incorporated into a short theatrical performance that portrays the queer relationship that Francis had with the body, and how he queered conventional notions on the body.

## The encounter with the leper

One of the most significant markers of the conversion of Francis that led him to deepen his love for God and humanity was his encounter with the leper. This moment is beautifully captured in Roberto Rossellini's film *Francesco, Giullare di Dio* (1950), showing the transition of Francis, as he comes out from his hiding place in the woods, to the climactic moment when he embraces the isolated leper in the openness of the field. This metamorphosis is fundamental to the understanding of the queerness of Francis. As Thomas of Celano states, Francis deplored lepers and "in the days of his vanity, he would look at their houses only from a distance of two miles and he would hold his nostrils with his hands" (I: I: VII, 17). In Medieval society, leprosy was considered to be the result of unnatural sex (Green, 2014: 158). The disease was associated with poverty, even though there were many cases of wealthy and noble persons falling prey to it, and was often used as a metaphorical representation of the moral pollution of the clergy (Carmichael, 2014: 47). According to Hsy, it was even associated with acts of sodomy (2010: 90). Following the advice of the Book of Leviticus (13, 45-46)[4], lepers were expelled from society and condemned to live in the wilderness. Just as the homosexuals in the Nazi concentration camps had to wear the pink triangle to be identified, the leper had to carry a bell and ring it when approaching other people (Le Goff, 2007: 92). A division was created between the city, the space where life was possible, and the outskirts, where life was challenging and precarious. Medieval society implemented the "necropolitics" of who should die, or be expelled, and who should live, in such a way that the politics of life become inseparable from the politics of death (Gossett, 2014: 31). The deformed and sick body could not mingle with the rest, to avoid threatening the well-being of the strong.

In contrast to this, Medieval society also believed that contact with the frail body was a means of salvation since it was an opportunity to practise one of the seven corporal works of mercy (Riches and Bildhauer, 2014: 182). The body of the

leper was a controlled body, or as Foucault would describe it, "a docile body" that is "subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1995: 136). It "improved" the status of the healthy people in society. Its social and theological function is a soteriological one: it provides a passageway to the Kingdom of Heaven, thus reinforcing even further the binary between the heathy and the unhealthy, and the clean and the unclean. Indeed, lepers were also "used" in the process of canonisation and declaration of saints. Two of the episodes to which Thomas of Celano refers in order to prove the sanctity of Francis were the healing of two lepers after his death (I: III: II: 46). This objectification of the leprous body dehumanised it, reducing it merely to a functional vehicle to assess whether a person deserves public veneration and admittance into the canon catalogue of saints.

This tension between repulsion and charity is manifested in the dramatic narrative presented by Thomas of Celano (II: I: V: 9). The scene embodies the transformation from a self-regarding and unemphatic person to a man who descends from his horse (symbol of power, wealth and masculinity) to kiss the leper. In Medieval culture, the actions of Francis in this vignette would accentuate his sense of charity and compassion. Blowing into a person's mouth was considered a way of healing a person or of conveying grace (Bynum, 1991: 184). It is nonetheless interesting to read the kinesthetics and the physicality of this scene from a contemporary queer angle to be able to reappropriate it. Juxtaposed against this framework, the episode depicts a heteronormative individual who abandons his comfort and privileged zone, albeit temporarily, to engage in a seemingly homoerotic moment. The leper disappears as soon as Francis mounts (note the sexual innuendo) his horse, thus mystifying the experience, and hinting that the leper was Christ. Yet the sexual element in the story remains: a few days later, Francis returns to the leper colony, and after offering a leper money, "he kissed his hand and his mouth" to exchange "the bitter for the sweet, and manfully prepared himself for the rest" (II: I: VI: 10). The binary between the sexual and the mystic is blurred, just as much as the schism between the beautiful and the horrid is obscured. This obfuscation between self, the rejected other and the Divine indicates that the three are intimately linked to the extent that just as much as the leper is Christ, the leper is also Francis. In rejecting the leper, Francis is rejecting himself, but in embracing the leper, he is embracing, and eventually discovering himself. As Hellmann states, "for the first time his heart was opened to his outcast brothers and sisters, and in his embrace of them he was embraced" (2015: 33). It is only "when we sit in discomfort, we grow" (McCann and Monaghan, 2020: 209).

There is also a defiance of an interesting power dynamic played out in this encounter. By embracing the leper, Francis was by-passing the powerful position of the priest. The role of the priest, was, and still is, to serve as a vehicle for the faithful to save their soul since he acts *in persona Christi capitis*. By reaching out to the leper as a layperson, Francis was creating "a potential route to salvation that [did] not require the mediation of a priest" (Riches and Bildhauer, 2014: 183), but that was self-sufficient. In that embrace, Francis defies the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Medieval Church.

The embracing of the leper defies all the binary schisms that characterise Medieval society. In embracing the leper in himself, Francis transcends the objectification of the leper. The outcast is no longer repellent, but neither is he functional. Furthermore, the leper is not required to discard his identity or transform it (unlike the miracle cases that happened after the death of Francis). Warner criticises the process of assimilation because to garner respectability it does not celebrate identity and diversity but morphs it into a reality acceptable in the mainstream (2000, 24-25). The leper resists the morphing, and likewise Francis does not attempt to transform the leper in himself into a tamer aspect that could be more acceptable to society. In the embracing of the leper, Francis discovers within himself the human and the erotic; the marginalised and the forlorn; the Divine and the mystic, and grows to realise that the barriers separating these realities are merely constructs.

## Francis the stripper

Thomas of Celano mentions episodes where Francis stripped in public. In the initial stages of his conversion, the hagiographer recounts how "frequently stripping himself, he clothed the poor" (II: I: IV: 8). Shortly afterwards he strips off his clothes in front of the crowd in the city of Assisi, as he renounces his birthright, in order to "go naked to the Lord" (II: I: VII: 12). In a third episode, Francis encounters an old woman begging for alms. The saint gives her the mantle that he was wearing and encourages her to make a dress for herself out of it. But when the woman realises that she does not have enough cloth, Francis encourages his companion to do the same, "and both remained naked so that the old woman might be clothed" (I: III: LIII: 86).

Francis' renunciation of his clothes is significant considering that he was a fashion aficionado. Thomas of Celano describes the young Francis as a man who "was the admiration of all and strove to outdo the rest in the pomp of vainglory [...] in soft and flowing garments" (I: I: I: 2). As Poletti claims, Francis hit "many of the 'marks' we'd associate later with homosexuals" (2021). His transition from the "dandy" wearing the latest fashion trend to the humble man clad in a simple

tunic, similar to what farmers wore (Melnick and Wood, 2005: 34), can be read in a more multifaceted manner. The exposure of his naked body is a transgressive act where he bares himself totally, not only on a physical level. Francis' stripping is an act of exhibitionism, and unlike the encounter with the leper, Francis' disrobing is a public act. Whether or not it gave him pleasure is unclear, but it is undoubtedly insubordinate on a political level. Pitts presents the case-study of a transgendered person who uses body modification to create an anomalous body which he displays at the beach. The manifestation may not remove the fear or hostility, but it certainly accentuates it (Pitts, 2000: 451). What is perceived as perverse, or shocking is "always organized to some degree by what it subverts" (Silverman, 1992: 186). Francis is subverting a culture that glorifies the clothed body. Fashion trends were, and still are, a marker to consolidate the men in power, for fashion has the faculty to "transform the identity of the individuals changing their bodies," which Saggioro refers to as *anthropopoiesis* (2020: 32). There were specific laws in Medieval society that regulated social class differences in dress, as well as markers in clothing to distinguish minorities such as the Jews (Green, 2014: 142), creating a "hierarchy of appearances" (Lirosi, 2020: 15). For example, stripes were used to indicate the avoidable other such as the heretic or the adulteress (Lirosi, 2020: 18). In the disrobing act in Assisi, the two men who are well-dressed, juxtaposed against the nudity of Francis, are his father, Pietro di Bernardone, representing the rising and affluent merchant class, and the Bishop, symbolising the Institution of the Church. In queering his use of clothes, Francis is detaching himself from the wealthy class, as well as from a Church that thrived in power and glory, a Church that in its wealth had created a distance between the clergy and the common people (Bynum, 1982: 12). In removing the layers of his clothes, Francis reveals and bares his true identity, rejecting the previous one which was synonymous with the oppressive class. His body is not yet as blemished as the body of the leper, but it is certainly at this stage more akin to it than to the flamboyant and luxurious vestments of the people around him in the piazza. His behaviour is seen as deviant and shameful, to the extent that the Bishop feels the urge to clothe him to avoid scandal. These dynamics are captured strongly in Giotto's masterpiece *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* (1295) in the Saint Francis cycle, housed in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi. Francis distances himself from his father and the rest of society, as the Bishop attempts to protect him by covering the lower part of his body. Warner discusses this notion of the politics of shame where he denounces people who "think not only that their own way of living is right, but that it should be everyone else's moral standard as well" (2000:4). Hence, in this vignette, Francis makes a bold statement: he announces the path of queerness that he intends to embrace in his new life, a life of authenticity. Hence, Francis' stripping becomes his official outing in front of and to the community.

## The scarred body

In the context of the Middle Ages, scarification is problematic. There were two categories of scarification: self-induced and caused by supernatural intervention. A binary schism can be noted between self-induced scarification, such as the scars caused by flagellation, a practice heavily discouraged by the Catholic Church, and supernaturally gifted forms of scarification, which were perceived as markers of a high level of sanctity (Le Goff, 2007: 42-43). On a spiritual level, the implication was that the holiness of the body should not be manipulated by the individual. The Pauline theological paradigm that distinguished between the *sarx* (the flesh) and the *soma* (the body[5]) was still strongly present in the Medieval approach to the physical. The body is good because it is created by God, whereas the flesh drives one towards evil, and is in conflict with the spirit. Although God created a sexed body, concupiscence is a result of the Fall (Mazo Karras and Murray, 2014: 63). The flesh could be mortified as long as the body was treated respectfully, honouring the Temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6: 19). Yet the mercantile class, as well as the nobility perceived scarification in a positive manner, applying it for different reasons, such as the rectification of humoral imbalances or the treatment of medical conditions (Green, 2014: 3).

Jacques Le Goff presents Francis as representational of the tension that characterises the Medieval concept of the body (2007: xii-xiii). Indeed, the Poverello, as an ascetic, mortified the flesh (II: I: XIV: 21), perceiving it as the barrier that "would stand between him and God" (I: II: VI: 103).  Yet the veneration of the body is also evident. He warns his friars that "to deprive the body indiscreetly of what it needs was a sin just the same as it is a sin to give it superfluous things" (II: I: XV: 22). Attisani states that Francis equated the body with a prison, as much as a playground: a locus of entrapment and of leisure (2003: 55). The culminating scene, in which Francis is pierced by the Stigmata on Mount La Verna, as presented in Thomas of Celano's hagiography (I: II: III: 94-96), challenges and queers this duality[6].

To comprehend the queerness of the La Verna narrative, we need to place it within the context of a rite of passage, whereby scarification is used in various cultures to mark a transition in life. In the contemporary Global North, scarification is sometimes modelled or influenced by images and patterns taken from these ethnic rites. The western body branded with such symbols is affiliating itself to this ethnic, and often marginalised, otherness (Pitts, 2000: 444). In the same way, on Mount La Verna, Francis is also experiencing a rite of passage that brands him to the total affiliation with the marginalised other. His scars do not resemble the deliberate markings that were common in Medieval society, and yet, even though they are replicas of the wounds of Christ, they do not correspond to any realities

that the Christian world, including the mystical sphere, had experienced so far. Francis is the first person to have received the Stigmata. Even if we had to demystify the Stigmata, and attribute them to natural causes – Schazlein and Sulmasy claim that it could have been a contraction of leprosy (1987: 181-217) – the Stigmata nonetheless can be seen as the summit of the queerness of Francis. Whether the Stigmata represent, from a spiritual perspective, the transcendental element of this person whose body became one with the body of his Beloved, which Bynum refers to as "that ultimate *imitatio*" (1982: 106), or whether it is the fruit of his reaching out to the outcast, this body marking classifies Francis as not being like the rest – indeed, as not being like anyone else.

The Stigmata are hence a sign of rejection and a cause of dejection. And yet it is in this isolation that Francis experiences the pleasure of the intimacy with the One that he loves most profoundly. This paradox has been described by various saints and mystics in the Middle Ages who enjoyed the pain, knowing that it brought them closer to the Divine by making them direct participants of the Passion of their Beloved (Karras and Murray, 2014: 74). Indeed, Bynum argues, with particular reference to female mystics, that in thirteenth century spirituality, "streams of blood" expressed a desire for physical contact with Jesus Christ (1982: 8). This enmeshment of the sexual and the mystical, as well as the pleasant and the painful, in such a way that the one cannot be separated from the other, features extensively in the narratives of the mystics of the Middle Ages (Riches and Bildhauer, 2014: 182). Thomas of Celano describes how even Francis experienced this pleasure in the pain when he received the Stigmata: "joy and grief were in him alternately" (I: II: III: 94).

Furthermore, in Medieval mystical literature the wound, including the wound in Christ's side, was associated with the vulva. The mystic could penetrate Christ through his wounds and out of the wound of Christ the Church was born (Riches and Bildhauer, 2014: 190). This is also reflected in thirteenth-century art, where various miniatures depict the Church issuing from the wounds on the side of Christ (Bynum, 1991: 97). In receiving the Stigmata, Francis is also being equipped with a vulva. Becoming an alter Christus implies that he can penetrate the reality of Christ, as much as Christ penetrates him. It also demonstrates that through his vulva/scars, the new Church can be born, a community based on fraternity and poverty, and freed from the corruption that was polluting the Institution. These images reflect the pleasure/pain paradigm: penetration and labour are both associated with this inseparable paradox.

Pitts presents a case-study where the sensation of pleasure and pain are evident in a ritual in which a person had his chest branded. The pleasure was intensified

by the presence of the selected community participating in and witnessing the ritual (Pitts, 2000: 449). Francis' ostracisation by his community of friars, who could not accept his radical approach, made him retreat to Mount La Verna (Le Goff, 1999: 22). Nevertheless, Francis' experience was not a solitary one. Even though the experience was intimate, Francis, nonetheless, selected witnesses with whom to share the intensity of the moment. One of them was Elias (I: II: III: 95) who, according to Elphick (2021: 23), is the same person who earlier on in Thomas of Celano's hagiography is referred to as "a certain man in the city of Assisi whom [Francis] loved more than any other" (I: I: III: 6). This intimate sharing of the scars is referred to again in the *Second Life* (II: I: VI: 11). However, the name of the witness is left anonymous, possibly due to the negative attitude that developed in the Franciscan Order towards Elias by the time Thomas of Celano wrote his second hagiography (Melnick and Wood, 2005: 66-69). The other witness is Brother Ruffino, who accidentally touches the scars and places his hand on Francis' chest to rub him (II: II: III, 95), a gesture which the contemporary reader would perceive as laden with eroticism. In the painting *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, attributed to van Eyck (c. 1430-34), it is Brother Leo who witnesses the scene. This painting simultaneously highlights the sense of isolation by placing the rugged landscape in the foreground against the city in the distant background.

The imprint of the "petite mort" remains till Francis' death, two years after the La Verna episode. Perhaps he had reached too heightened a level of queerness by now. Even though the first two vignettes – the encounter with the leper and the disrobing in Assisi – indicate the extent to which this man was ready to confront the power dynamics of the *status quo*, the trajectory reaches its culmination in this final transformation. The performative show was complete, and all that was left to accomplish was the curtain call in style and in grace, on the 3rd of October 1226.

## The performance

The above insights were "translated" into a twenty-minute theatrical piece to use the performative act as a vehicle to convey in a more sensory and palpable manner the dynamics of these observations. The researcher, together with four students reading for a degree in the Performing Arts at the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), devised a queer performance based on the figure of Francis of Assisi. This activity was done as part of the Performance Theory study-unit that the students were following, and which was taught by the researcher. The objective of the task was to take a theory covered in class, in this case queer theory, and apply it in practice. The students were exposed to

the information presented in this paper and were asked to brainstorm ideas which were then converted into a script.

Before describing the development of this project, it is important to embed it within the practice of queer pedagogy. Drazenovich (2015: 4) insists on the role that educators have to equip students to think critically about sexual identity in order to be able to deconstruct it and interpret it in a more fluid manner. Queer pedagogy "involves interpreting human sexuality politically, socially and culturally, and subverting dominant discourses from a poststructural educational standpoint" (Drazenovich, 2015: 5). This critical approach leads each student to ask different questions, and consequently, arrive at different conclusions (Drazenovich, 2015: 9). It is "a pedagogy whose grounds of possibility require risk, uncertainty, and implication in traumatic times" (Britzman, 2012: 293). In practice, though, this may be problematic, particularly in the rigid educational system. Waite (2017: 7) questions whether queer and pedagogy can be melded "for pedagogy is about disciplining the subject. Pedagogy is a heterosexed political indoctrination in service of a heterosexual institutional imperative". The problem becomes even more complex in the light of what Britzman (2012: 297) identifies as the two approaches to queer pedagogy: providing information on queer realities and changing the attitude of the learners towards sexuality. The former could be counterproductive. It fosters, possibly unintentionally, an us/them mentality (Britzman, 2012: 299), and does not challenge the learner to think out of the box. Indeed, it places the learner in a passive role. Although in this project students were initially provided with information – the building blocks of queer theory – they were nonetheless given a context where they had to apply their learning. Applying theory in the arts allowed them to think critically and to arrive at their own conclusions, since learning happened in a holistic and practical manner.

Figure 1: The cast clockwise from the left – Daniel Carabott, Jack De Maria Casabene, Miguel Farrugia, Frances Galea. Photo by Miguel Farrugia.

One important decision that needs to be addressed in a queer performance is what is going to be queered: the character; the form and the theatrical conventions; the aesthetics; or a number of these (Personal interview with queer artists

Ruby Glaskin and Leo Skilbeck, 2021). In this context, the students focused on the character as well as how the semiotics of the performance reflect and challenge power dynamics, inviting the audience to see the world queerly for the duration of the performance. Over the period of two weeks the students experimented to find interesting and engaging ways to create a queer performance through the use of lights, spatial dynamics, music and props.

Figure 2: The props and costumes. Photo by Miguel Farrugia.

An aspect that the students wanted to emphasise in this performative exercise was the relevance that the figure of Francis still has for the queer community. Hence, Francis was depicted as a contemporary teenager questioning his orientation and gender, and still discovering and understanding his body. The leper was a Muslim HIV positive transgender person, on the premise that in the contemporary Maltese context this intersectional scenario would be considered on the last echelon in the periphery. The first Franciscan followers were teenage friends of Francis who classify themselves as queer too.

The limitation of contextualising the story of Francis was that the secular element was accentuated to the detriment of the spiritual and/or religious. This was done to reflect the local Maltese society that in the last ten years has become more secularised, with the Catholic Church losing significantly the power that it had before (Farrugia and Magri, 2021). Most references to the Transcendent and all references to the Church as an institution were removed from the narrative. This also led to a change in the final scene as the script was developing. In the first draft of the script, Francis agrees to have his body marked so that he physically resembles his Beloved. In the final draft, the motivation for the scarification was the need to mark the authenticity of the questioning of the character.

Figure 2: Scene from "Queering Francis." Actor: Miguel Farrugia, playing Francis of Assisi. Photo by Deacon Xuereb.

Inspired by queer performances such as *Joan* by Milk Presents (2015), the element of cabaret, stand-up comedy and interaction were also central to the devising of the performance. A narrator called Society passed comments on the queerness of Francis by criticising how the contemporary world has forgotten the "conventions of etiquette" and has become "topsy-turvy," endorsing a patriarchal, exclusive, misogynist, and heteronormative approach, and blaming women for turning boys into softies. The fact that the entertainer of the show is the person who reflects the viewpoint of a hegemonic society places the audience in a deliberately uncomfortable position. Are they ready to be entertained by these claims of oppression or are they ready to react against them, and if so, how?

Figure 3: Scene from "Queering Francis" – Frances Galea, playing Society.[7] Photo by Deacon Xuereb.

An element of the cabaret convention was also incorporated through the choice of music and songs in the performance. During a party where genderqueer Sam Smith's *I feel love* is being played, Francis discovers that there is a Muslim transgender person living in the wilderness. The lyrics of other LGBT-friendly artists, such as Lady Gaga, were also used as spoken parts of the text, and live music was played in a number of scenes.

The learners also challenged the conventions of performance. The curtain call was held towards the beginning of the performance, in such a way that the ending focuses on the struggle that Francis is going through rather than on the glorification of the performers.

Figure 4: Scene from "Queering Francis." Actors from left to right – Miguel Farrugia, Jack De Maris Casabene, Frances Galea. Photo by Deacon Xuereb.

This theatrical piece was staged in a small hall in a Jesuit retreat house, for an audience of twenty-five persons. Hence, in line with what Attisani refers to as Franciscan non-representational theatre (2003: 54), the performance was not held in a conventional theatrical space. The audience was mostly composed of members of Drachma LGBT, an organisation that meets bimonthly, whose objective is to integrate sexuality with spirituality. Representatives of other local LGBT organisations were also invited to attend. After the performance, there was a forty-minute discussion about the dynamics that issued from the theatrical work, moderated by the co-ordinator of Drachma LGBT, Christopher Vella.

Figure 5: The space. Photo by Miguel Farrugia.

The notion of fear emerged poignantly in the discussion. Society fears queerness because it challenges its infrastructure. This fear was incarnated by the spectrum of characters in the play. Even the queer community that Francis encounters at the end of the play becomes threatening when Francis refuses to be marked in the same way as they are. At the core of the fear is the need to be respected, whether by society at large, or by the subgroup that one belongs to, fuelled by the "promise of happiness," the cultural imperative that drives us towards life choices that are in conformity with vanilla behaviour (Ahmed, 2010: 89-91). Any physical expression that does not mirror the conventions of that community is shunned, and this fear spurs the person towards assimilation and commodification, even if this implies marginalising the other as a scapegoat (Rubin, 1998: 150). Undoubtedly solitude is the price to pay when you go against the grain, but as one audience member remarked, solitude is a sign of growth, and in discovering

his internal and external identity, in this theatrical piece Francis addresses his fears by undergoing a journey from loneliness to solitude. This is a soul-wrenching process, embodied in the dramatic representation through a physicalised sequence of leaps and falls. It reflects the queer ambivalence studied by Johnson (2015: 162-165), who demonstrates how queer people struggle between the desire for belonging and the discarding of normativity . As Francis becomes more capable of detaching from the human beings who misunderstand him (loneliness), he experiences a transformation leading to authenticity (solitude). The lonely person depends on the recognition of the others and feels demeaned when not acknowledged whereas solitude is a state of authenticity since in it the person is not reliant on the approval of others to be himself. In this performance, Francis embarks on this transition. The encounter with the transgender person/leper is fundamental to his discovery of the courage to be able to commence the journey. Paralleling the narrative of the Stonewall riots, where the courage of the transgender people was a main stimulus for the event, the trans person in this version of the story of Francis is a role-model because "I wouldn't have been here today if it weren't for them."

Figure 6: Scene from "Queering Francis." Actors from left to right – Daniel Carabott, Miguel Farrugia, Frances Galea, Jack De Maria Casabene. Photo by Deacon Xuereb.

However, even though the references to Jesus Christ were removed, the presence of the Beloved is the principal key to the transformation from loneliness to solitude. As Francis ascends painstakingly a mountain after being rejected by his followers, he meets a girl from the queer community who sings the refrain from *Everything's Alright* from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As an audience member indicated, this sequence was pivotal since it merged the figure of the body of Francis of Assisi with the figure of the body of Jesus Christ. By a meta-reference to the story of Christ, Francis understands that whatever body he might have, it is "alright. / Everything's fine. / And we want you to sleep well tonight. / Let the world turn without you tonight. / If you try, we'll get by. / So forget all about them tonight." This realisation, as well as the embracing of the uncertainty that he is in at this stage of the journey, leads him to accept to be physically scarred, experiencing the transformation, catharsis and overcoming of fear that Pitts refers to in one of

her case-studies on queer body modification (2000: 452, 457). In a unique manner Francis embraces "the wonderful you that you are."

## Conclusion

Figure 7: Scene from "Queering Francis." Actor Miguel Farrugia. Photo by Deacon Xuereb.

This research project analyses the potential queer reading of Francis of Assisi in relation to his physicality. By focusing on three specific vignettes from Thomas of Celano's hagiographies, which represent three distinctive phases, we have shown that Francis questions the society he lived in, that categorised bodies and determined which bodies, and body markings were acceptable and which were deplorable. In doing so, Francis experiences a deep personal voyage from the private sphere to the public and back to the private. In the first phase, Francis has to withdraw from the city he lives in, thus discarding all its social conventions, to encounter the leper. This is the beginning of his journey of personal discovery. In the second phase he returns to the public sphere and renounces all his ties with society. In the third phase, Francis reaches maturity when he embraces the rejection of his followers and recedes to La Verna. By the end of these phases, Francis has embraced his body and recognised it as a true celebration of diversity. This process is nevertheless daunting as it is an uphill struggle that defies social norms. In the discussion group held after the theatrical piece about a modern-day Francis discovering the beauty of his specific body, this message resonated very strongly. This was the manifestation, and the outcome, of the power of finding oneself, for

> [...] it is through performance that we acknowledge the multiplicity, the otherness, of ourselves; that it is through performance that we carry the never-ending dialogue with those selves through which we question and articulate our individual and cultural notions of identity; that it is indeed through performance that we can enjoin those notions into being (Nudd, Schriver and Galloway, 2001: 115).

## notes

**1** There is a dearth of information about the life of Thomas of Celano. His date of birth is uncertain and his family name is unknown. Probably he joined the Franciscan Order in 1215. He was selected in 1221 to found the Order in Germany and two years later year Thomas was appointed Vicar Provincial. Although Thomas met Francis of Assisi, he did not have any contact with him in the last years of the life of the saint. In 1228, Pope Gregory IX commissioned him to write the *First Life* of Francis of Assisi which was completed the year after, that is four years after the death of Francis. There is no information revealing why Thomas was chosen for this task. His main sources were his own limited encounters with Francis and the testimonies of witnesses. He also had access to the writings of Francis. In 1244, he was asked to write the *Second Life* of Francis of Assisi by the minister general to include more anecdotes by Franciscan brothers who had had contact with the Poverello. This work was based on written material that the Franciscan brothers sent to Thomas. He probably died in 1260 (Hermann, 1983: 179-186).

**2** Since in this work Thomas of Celano's hagiographies will be referred to frequently, any references to his writings will be cited with three Roman numerals, followed by an Arabic numeral. The first Roman numeral refers to whether the citation is taken from the *First* or *Second Life*. The second numeral refers to the book and the third numeral to the chapter. The Arabic numeral refers to the section in the chapter. The publication that was used in this study was issued in 1983. For further details refer to the bibliography.

**3** "the holy father, caressing it [the rabbit] with motherly affection" (I: I: XXI: 60); "he touched them and showed his compassion for them like a mother over her weeping child"(I: I: XXVIII: 79); "Brother Elias, whom Francis had chosen to take the place of a mother in his own regard and to take the place of a father for the rest of the brothers" (I: II: IV: 98). These references also need to be understood within the context of the maternal imagery that was used in the Medieval period to address male religious authority figures, stemming from the affective spirituality of the Middle Ages (Bynum, 1991: 112-113).

**4** The New International Version will be used for all Bible quotations, unless otherwise stated.

**5** "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want" (Galatians 5: 17). Paul uses the word "flesh," as opposed to the body.

**6** A scholar who challenges this dualistic aspect and argues that there is little basis for it in the Middle Ages is Caroline Walker Bynum. According to her, the Medieval body is not a site of entrapment but an opportunity for redemption, a notion that developed particularly from the thirteenth century onwards (Bynum, 1991: 16), and which accounts for the mortification of the flesh that took place in this period (182). She also argues that it is the saints and the mystics with the strongest ascetic practice who acquired the most heightened realisation of the body as a means of revealing the Divine (256). It may be that the dualistic approach was challenged as a result of the Stigmata of Francis (rather than before): his mystical experience was embodied, revealing that the body is the vehicle to eternal salvation.

**7** The casting decisions were taken by the learners. The only person in the cohort who identified as female wanted to play the role of Society, whereas the other students did not express an interest in doing so. Initially I was aware that this meant that the only woman in the performance would be embodying the most homophobic character

in the play, but based on my belief in democratic practices in the classroom, I decided to proceed according to the decisions taken by the learners.

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