

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making Masculine Monks: Gender, Space, and the Imagined “Child” in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Identity Formation

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Bernard of Clairvaux’s letter to his young cousin Robert, written in the early 1120s CE, ignited a public controversy between the powerful Cluniacs and the upstart Cistercians over proper monastic practice and recruitment that smoldered throughout the twelfth century. This article examines how Cistercian polemics arose out of this new monastic competition to form Cistercian identity. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians under his influence employed a rhetoric that drew on notions of space, age, and gender to present their rivals as worldly, feminine, and immature and themselves as mature and masculine warriors on the front lines of ascetic battle against the vices. In doing so, the Cistercians deployed a gendered concept of “childhood” and “youth” that shaped their understanding of monastic conversion and progression as maturation from a worldly, feminized child to a mature and masculine monk. By centering “childhood” as a category of analysis, this article demonstrates the importance of age to Cistercian constructions of monastic masculinity. The gender-crossing martial, nuptial, and maternal imagery for which the Cistercians are famous relied on constructions of the “child.” This article shows that “childhood” and “adulthood” are mutually constitutive, gendered categories and reveals that “childhood” is as important to constructing Christian masculinities as notions of “woman.”

Keywords: Cistercians; Bernard of Clairvaux; Monasticism; Masculinity; Gender; Childhood

In his letter to his younger cousin, Robert of Chatillon (d. c. 1181), Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) rhetorically asked, “If the first man, gripped by treachery, [was] expelled from the homeland of happiness, what wonder if a delicate youth [Robert] was snatched in a place of horror and vast wilderness?”¹ Bernard ended the letter by chiding Robert, the “delicate soldier (*delicate miles*)” for abandoning his Cistercian comrades on the front

¹Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 4: “Qui Protoplastum dolo captum expulit de patria felicitatis, quid mirum si tenero subripuit adolescentulo in loco horroris et vastae solitudinis?” Citations from Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, eds. Jean Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cisterciensis, 1957–1977) are abbreviated with the title of the work, then SBO followed by the volume and page number. All Latin translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

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lines.² Bernard contended that Robert had been duped by the prior of Cluny into abandoning the “place of horror and vast wilderness” of Clairvaux for an easier and more worldly life at Cluny. Cluny’s apparent soft worldliness appealed to Robert’s delicate youthfulness according to Bernard, and so, Robert ran from the battle at Clairvaux. In this letter, Bernard brought together a constellation of various spatial, gendered, and age-related images to explain the Cistercian way of life in comparison to other rival monastic groups. The Cistercians made boys into men through the “battle” of their strict asceticism and the supposed remote and rugged locations of their monasteries.³ Conversely, Cluny’s worldliness and lax practice appealed to the immature. In his invective against Robert and the Cluniacs, Bernard deployed notions of childhood and youth in a way that lent meaning to the intersecting gendered and spatial rhetoric he used to construct a Cistercian identity.

For traditional monastic groups, like the Cluniacs, a significant number of their recruits lived in the monastery from childhood on. Beginning in the Carolingian era and extending through the twelfth century, oblates, that is, children whose parents offered them to monasteries as gifts to God, had been the primary source of new monastic recruits.⁴ Despite this, monastic houses also replenished their numbers through a combination of recruitment strategies, including attracting monks and ecclesiastics from other monasteries and institutions, though it is entirely possible, perhaps even likely, that these types of recruits had been oblates or trained from childhood in cathedral or monastic schools as well.⁵ By the mid-eleventh century, traditional Benedictine houses began to experience a surge in voluntary adult conversions, which prompted them to rethink and reestablish the novitiate as an institution of monastic training.⁶ It was within this context of rising adult enthusiasm for the regular life that new monastic groups of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries ceased taking child oblates altogether, and the practice of oblation began to face opposition among traditional monastic groups as well.⁷ Within their first two decades, the Cistercians discouraged taking young boys as new recruits, even if the age restrictions were not officially codified in the statutes until sometime toward 1147, when the minimum age for entry was set at fifteen and then increased to eighteen sometime between 1157 and

²Ibid., 11.

³Despite medieval Cistercian contentions, scholars have abandoned the notion that Cistercians invariably settled in wilderness areas. For a brief overview of the historiography and the Cistercian rhetorical use of the “wilderness,” see Mette Birkedal Bruun and Emilia Jamrozak, “Introduction: Withdrawal and Engagement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order*, ed. Mette Birkedal Bruun, 4–10 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴Mayke De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1, 73, 126–155.

⁵On these monastic recruitment strategies prior to the twelfth century, see Steven Vanderputten, “Monastic Recruitment in an Age of Reform: New Evidence for the Flemish Abbey of Saint-Bertin (10th–12th Centuries),” *Revue Bénédictine* 122 (2012): 242–250.

⁶For the growth in traditional Benedictine numbers in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, see John Van Engen, “The ‘Crisis of Cenobitism’ Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050–1150,” *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (April 1986): 275–277. On surging recruitment’s relationship to the re-establishment of the novitiate, see Isabelle Cochelin, “Peut-on parler de noviciat de Cluny pour les Xe–XIe siècles?” *Revue Mabillon, nouvelle série* 9, no. 10 (1998): 17, 35; and Mirko Breitenstein, *Das Noviziat im hohen Mittelalter: Zur Organisation des Eintrittes bei den Cluniakern, Cisterziensern und Franziskanern* (Berlin: Lit, 2008), 212.

⁷De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, 290–302.

1179.⁸ This change offered new challenges for monastic formation as adult recruits with experience of the world, business, love, sex, childrearing, and battle brought a new psychology into the Cistercian monastery.⁹ This new psychology meant the spiritualized metaphors that employed gender, family relationships, battle, and the vices of the world increasingly reflected an adult recruits' experience. This worldly experience, Talal Asad argued, had to be "re-described" within a religious language.¹⁰ Bernard and others provided the resources for this reorientation by combining certain aspects of traditional Christian vocabulary with that of the world to appeal to formerly worldly adults.¹¹ The need for the Cistercians to differentiate themselves by re-describing adult experience within traditional Christian discourses produced a hyper-gendered, violent Cistercian rhetoric about ascetic practice in which the recruit entered the monastery as an imagined "child" and, ideally, progressed into a masculine monk fit for the spiritual battlefield.

This article examines the intersection of three modes of monastic discourse—space, age, and gender—to understand the broad schema through which the Cistercians organized their identity. In addition to the importance of the nuptial and maternal imagery so often associated with the Cistercians, scholars have begun to examine the significance of masculine rhetoric and imagery to monastic notions of gender and identity.¹² Though scholarship has not commonly treated the intertwined nature of gender and age, I argue here that Cistercian gender depended on their perceptions of age, especially how they imagined childhood and youth. By examining the language of Cistercian differentiation, we find that their gendered language constructed a set of progressions in which monks moved from feminine to masculine as they "matured" from a "child" to an adult. Cistercian rhetoric is famous for its gendered reversals that present monastic progression as a transformation from the worldly, weak, and feminine beginner to an

⁸This regulation is found in most of the early collections of Cistercian statutes, see Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., "De pueris litteras discentibus," in *Twelfth-Century Statutes from the Cistercian General Chapter: Latin Text with English Notes and Commentary* (Cîteaux-Commentarii cistercienses, 2002), 559; see also, Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux: Latin Text in Dual Edition with English Translations and Notes* (Achel: Cîteaux-Comentarii cistercienses, 1999) 490; and Joseph Lynch, "Cistercians and Underage Novices," *Cîteaux* 24 (1973): 285, 287. Though still young, at fifteen, the *Rule of Benedict* envisioned an oblate becoming a full member of the community. See Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 291 (RB 70.4).

⁹Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France: Psycho-Historical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 8–26.

¹⁰Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 144.

¹¹*Ibid.* 143–145.

¹²See, for example, the work of Line Engh, who argues that the gender bending and gender crossing of Bernard of Clairvaux's male bride did not de-gender the monk, but rather constructed a transcendent masculinity, allowing the monk to work toward becoming a *vir perfectus*. Line Engh, *Gendered Identities in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs: Performing the Bride* (Turnhout, BE: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2014), 402. See also Katherine Allen Smith for the role of martial language in monastic masculinity. Katherine Allen Smith, "Spiritual Warriors in Citadels of Faith: Martial Rhetoric and Monastic Masculinity in the Long Twelfth Century," in *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, 86–110 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Katherine Allen Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2011).

experienced, masculine ascetic.¹³ Importantly, progression is inherent to Cistercian transformations from female weakness to male strength, and Cistercian rhetoric about progression assumes the monk also matures from a “child” to a masculine monk. This language of progression and maturation established a spectrum between the feminine, childish space of the world and the masculine space of the monastery. By articulating this gendered ascetic progression, Cistercians also constructed their identity, and they understood their spiritual development from immature to mature as a masculinizing undertaking. These overlapping programs, construed as gendered, progressive, and ascetic, were foundational to Cistercian culture. Cistercian authors inflected a traditional Christian rhetoric of spiritual growth, spiritual warfare, and self-denial with a masculine quality that took on a new immediacy as they attempted to recruit and train adults, often with worldly experience. Age and gender became malleable and intersecting markers of identity that not only organized social relations and authority in the monastery but also relations between the Cistercians and other monastic groups, while differentiating feminine, worldly spaces from truly masculine monasteries.

I. Cistercian Identity and Gendered Space

Spatial metaphors are indispensable to Christian discourses about conversion. Christian authors defined their religious practice over and against that of the “world.” Becoming a Christian meant metaphorically leaving the world behind. This world-rejecting ethic comprises a foundational understanding of the Christian ascetic and formational project. For monks, conversion meant an actual change of space that corresponded to leaving an old life behind for a new one. Drawing a distinction between the old self and the ideal new “ascetic self” necessarily invoked a difference between the “world” and the “monastery.” By articulating what a monk ought to deny, monastic authors defined and explained the culture to be denied in the spatial terms of the “world” versus the “monastery.”¹⁴ This type of ascetic, spatial discourse is fundamental to Christian identity formation.

Just as ascetic discourse constructs a personal identity, it also creates a communal identity at the same time. Religious groups often stress minute differences over significant similarities between groups to erect barriers that work to retain and attract adherents. Sociologists have termed this phenomenon “marginal differentiation” in their studies of the American religious landscape and historians have applied similar notions in studies of sectarian groups.¹⁵ New religious competition, like that between the Cistercians and traditional Benedictine groups, such as the Cluniacs, forced new groups to name what made them distinctive. As a dialectical process, this produced a Cistercian identity through critique of other groups. This type of “boundary language” identified a Cistercian ideal and, in the process, produced a symbolic world through which they could construct and claim a unique identity.¹⁶ Not only did the

¹³See Martha G. Newman, “Real Men and Imaginary Women: Engelhard of Langheim Considers a Woman in Disguise,” *Speculum* 78, no. 4 (October 2003): 1204–1205.

¹⁴For the way ascetic language constructs culture, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xii.

¹⁵Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), 151–153; Titus Hjelm, “Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion,” in *Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion: 50 Years after the Sacred Canopy*, ed. Titus Hjelm (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 53.

¹⁶For the use of “boundary language” in the formation of early Christian sects, including how it produced unique “symbolic worlds,” see L. Michael White, “Shifting Sectarian Boundaries in Early Christianity,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 70, no. 3 (1988): 20–24.

Cistercians assert that the monastery stood opposite the world, but they also positioned themselves in opposition to “worldly” monastic groups.

For the Cistercians, space affected gendered holiness. Every aspect of the austere Cistercian monastery, and the quality of the practice within, could help a monk toward a masculine, ascetic self-realization—from the chant, to the buildings, to the physical location. Conversely, exquisitely adorned spaces, which smelled of sumptuous food or pleasing ointments or was full of curiosities, threatened a man’s masculine spiritual potential. Cistercians intentionally opted for austere spaces in contrast to the more ornate architecture, lavish accoutrements, and colorful decorations of the churches and cloisters of other monastic groups, particularly traditional monastic groups, such as the Cluniacs.¹⁷ Cistercian writers wielded all of these aspects as tools to present the Cistercians as masculine monks and their rivals as feminine and entangled in the world. This is most evident in Bernard’s letter to Robert and his *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem* (*Apologia for Abbot William*), both of which are early works written in the first half of the 1120s that criticized what Bernard thought to be the excesses of traditional Benedictine practice.¹⁸ Both of these works, and especially the *Apologia*, promote Cistercian ideas about the ideal conditions for monastic progression.¹⁹ These writings illustrate how space, religious formation, and gender intersected in identity formation both within the monastery and outside of it.

Monastic authors interwove gendered and spatial rhetoric. Roberta Gilchrist demonstrates how monastic space shaped and constituted gender by determining social relations, behaviors, and labor.²⁰ In this way, space fundamentally influenced monastic enculturation and socialization, particularly of the gendered *habitus* of an order or group, and by extension the metaphors that explained monastic social divisions.²¹ Cistercians created not only physical and geographical boundaries but also mental and psychological boundaries that helped new recruits imagine the differences between the monastic and non-monastic worlds.²² These mental boundaries helped reinforce Cistercian communal identity while also providing an impetus for redescribing a new recruit’s non-monastic past.²³

Cistercian spatial metaphors established a contrast between the monastery and the world in which each signified a specific way of life. Whereas Cistercians construed the world as a feminine space, riddled with vice and temptation, they understood the monastery to be a masculine space of rugged wilderness. Bernard employed this gender spectrum to articulate conversion from the world to the space of the monastery. In the world, Bernard suggests, people cared for the flesh rather than the soul. He described

¹⁷See Terry N. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002), 14–15.

¹⁸The dating of the letter to Robert and Bernard’s related treatise, the *Apologia* is contested. Traditionally, scholars have dated both works to c. 1125. Christopher Holdsworth, however, argues for a date for the *Apologia* of c. 1121–1122. Either way, it is generally accepted that the letter to Robert was written before the *Apologia*. On the dating of the letter to Robert, see Monique Duchet-Suchaux, “Introduction aux lettres 1–41,” in *Bernard de Clairvaux, Œuvres Complètes, II, Lettres, Tome I (Lettres 1–41), Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 425 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 51–52; see also Christopher Holdsworth, “The Early Writings of Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Cîteaux* 45 (1994): 39–48.

¹⁹Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, 14.

²⁰Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 17.

²¹Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, 17.

²²Megan Cassidy-Welch, *Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries* (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2001), 23–25.

²³*Ibid.*, 32–33, 35–38.

the monastery, however, as a space of battle to subdue carnal vices. In Bernard's polemics, the extent of a congregation's austerity, or lack thereof, indicated their level of worldliness. His critiques of other monastic groups collapsed distinctions between the "world" and other monasteries so that anybody who converted to the Cistercians, whether they left behind a different monastery, clerical office, or their lay lives, left behind feminine, worldly lives for masculine training in the "wilderness" of Clairvaux.

Monastics have consistently invoked the wilderness to imagine their identity.²⁴ Monks used notions of the wilderness to A) contrast their way of life from that of the city and court and B) construct their own culture in such a way as to demonstrate the efficacy of their practice through taming the wilderness.²⁵ In this way monks demonstrated their separateness from worldly culture but also still connected to it through their domesticity and agricultural efforts.²⁶ Bernard presents Clairvaux as a masculine wilderness where men could prove their mettle by using the language of worldly battle to illustrate the monastic life. In his letter to Robert, Bernard writes that those who had meditated on the perpetual flames of Hell no longer dreaded the wilderness.²⁷ By describing Clairvaux as "a place of horror and vast wilderness," Bernard connects a monk's understanding of a place to the condition of their soul.²⁸ Metaphors of place, however, carried with them real material referents. Cistercians understood that the successful cultivation of the wilderness corresponded to the quality of their ascetic practice.²⁹ Furthermore, the condition of their soul shaped their experience of the Cistercian life.³⁰ Indeed, for practiced and mature monks the horror of the wilderness faded away. Meanwhile it was a stumbling block for the undisciplined or youthful.

Not only did Bernard present Clairvaux as a masculine wilderness defined by austerity, he claims that the Cluniac prior who convinced Robert to leave Clairvaux represented a reversal of monastic virtue. He explains:

He lures, entices, flatters, and this preacher of a new Gospel commends drunkenness [and] condemns temperance; he says voluntary poverty is misery; fasting, vigils, silence and manual labor he calls mad extravagance; on the other hand he calls sloth contemplation, gluttony, talkativeness, curiosity—indeed all intemperance he calls discretion.³¹

A little later, Bernard asserts that Cluny's comfortable clothing and fine food are meant for palaces, not monasteries, and fed the body and its lusts.³² They are "poultices for the

²⁴See Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 47–59.

²⁵Ellen F. Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 26.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

²⁷*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 10: "Vigilias times et ieiunia, manuumque laborem; sed haec levia sunt meditantium flammis perpetuis. Recordatio deinde tenebrarum exteriorum facit non horrere solitudinem."

²⁸Martha G. Newman, *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform, 1098–1180* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 69, 96.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 94–96.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 94.

³¹*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 4: "Attrahit, allicit, blanditur, et novi Evangelii praedicator commendat crapulam, parsimoniam damnat, voluntariam paupertatem miseriam dicit, ieiunia, vigilias, silentium manuumque laborem vocat insaniam; e contrario otiositatem contemplationem nuncupat, edacitatem, loquacitatem, curiositatem, cunctam denique intemperantiam nominat discretionem."

³²*Ibid.*, 9.

weak, not the weapons of fighting men.”³³ Bernard writes that the frying pan fattened not the soul but the effeminate flesh (*caro*).³⁴ He ends the letter by exhorting Robert to “Rise, knight of Christ, rise, shake off the dust, return to the battle from whence you ran away.”³⁵ In this final section, by presenting the Cistercian life as a battle, Bernard describes Clairvaux as a variety of masculine spaces for which effeminate soldiers are not suited.³⁶ It is the front line, complete with ramparts and other barriers, and a battlefield full of fellow combatants.³⁷

Bernard again collapses the distinction between other monastic orders and the world in his *Apologia to Abbot William*. In this early work of his, much like in his letter to Robert, Bernard articulates his ideals on monastic living.³⁸ He begins the work by admonishing his own monks for their pride, the worst of all vices (but a vice that arose out of excellent ascetic practice). By the end of the treatise, however, Bernard excoriates traditional monastics for their worldliness.³⁹

For Bernard, the Cluniac’s reversal of his ideal monastic practice allowed the world to invade the monastery. He describes this reversal in feminine terms. As in his letter to Robert, he accuses the Black Monks of making vice into virtue. He writes:

Look, for instance, frugality is reckoned greed, sobriety believed to be austerity, silence counts as sorrow. On the other hand, slackening is called discretion, lavishness generosity, talkativeness kindness, immoderate laughter joy, soft clothing and the arrogance of [riding] horses respectability, being picky about superfluous things is cultivating neatness, when we expend these things on one another, it is called love.⁴⁰

Bernard reasons that these reversals served the body, treacherously murdering the soul, as “surely this compassion is disordered and irrational, as the flesh is barren and unfruitful.”⁴¹ Bernard then claims that by inverting vice and virtue the Black Monks

³³Ibid.: “Sed haec infirmantium sunt fomenta, non arma pugnantium.”

³⁴Ibid.: “Frixuris non anima saginatur, sed caro.”

³⁵Ibid., 10: “Surge, miles Christi, surge, excutere de pulvere, revertere ad proelium unde fugisti, fortius post fugam proeliaturus, gloriosius triumphaturus.”

³⁶Ibid., 11: Bernard asks Robert, “Quid armorum refugis pondus et asperitatem, delicate miles?”

³⁷Ibid., 10–11.

³⁸For the date of the *Apologia* and its relationship to Bernard’s letter to Robert, see note 18 above.

³⁹The *Apologia* applied to a more general monastic audience than just the Cluniacs; because of this I will refer to traditional Benedictines as “Black Monks (a reference to the color of their habit)” when the reference is broader than Cluny itself. However, in many of his critiques Bernard, most likely had Cluny and its affiliates in mind. Indeed, Cluniac monks primarily replied to Bernard. Peter the Venerable wrote a letter in reply (Letter 28), and scholars generally hold that Hugh of Reading—Reading being perhaps the most important Cluniac monastery in England at the time—wrote the *Riposte* in response to Bernard’s *Apologia*. See Conrad Rudolph, *The “Things of Greater Importance”: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 159–191; see also Jean Leclercq, “Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard’s *Apologia* to Abbot William, Introduction,” in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: Volume One, Treatises I* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1970), 5–12.

⁴⁰*Apologia*, SBO 3, 95: “Ecce enim parcitas putatur avaritia, sobrietas austeritas creditur, silentium tristitia reputatur. Econtra remissio discretio dicitur, effusio liberalitas, loquacitas affabilitas, cachinnatio iucunditas, mollities vestimentorum et equorum fastus honestas, lectorum superfluous cultus munditia, cumque haec alterutrum impendimus, caritas appellatur.”

⁴¹Ibid., 95–96: “Talis misericordia crudelitate plena est, qua videlicet ita corpori servitur, ut anima iuguletur. . . Inordinata profecto atque irrationabilis misericordia est, sterilis et infructuosae carnis. . .”

lavish attention on the disordered, irrational, and barren flesh, all words with negative feminine connotations. This, he claims, is akin to “feeding a barren woman who does not give birth, that is, something useless, enslaved to the lusts of the flesh.”⁴² Bernard associates traditional Benedictines with the world/flesh/woman, the inverse of the Cistercian program of masculinizing maturation. To give in to vice feminizes the monk.

This indulging of the flesh amounted to abandoning the front lines. In condemning some young monks who faked ill to avoid their duties and indulge their appetites, Bernard writes:⁴³

I ask you, is this safe, amid the gnashing of teeth, gleaming spears, arrows flying all around, to act as if the war had already ended and the enemy had been conquered, to throw down arms for a long lunch and to lie down naked in a soft bed? What cowardice is this, oh brave soldiers? Your allies are wallowing in blood and carnage while you are enjoying delicate foods and taking an early sleep.”⁴⁴

Bernard’s spatial metaphors are again important. He makes it clear that by retreating to the infirmary the young monks deserted their comrades and left them “wallowing in blood and carnage” on the front lines.⁴⁵

Bernard also employs this gendered separation between the world and monastic practice to explain the differences between the contemplative Knights Templar and worldly knights in his work *De laude novae militiae* (*In Praise of the New Knighthood*).⁴⁶ Worldly knights, Bernard explains, are more interested in pomp and glory than winning battles. He excoriates them for dressing their horses in fine silks, decorating their gear, and adorning themselves with gold, silver, and jewels.⁴⁷ He asks, “Are these the markers of knighthood or rather the embellishments of women?”⁴⁸ To these worldly, womanly knights, Bernard accuses, “you nurse your hair in the habit of women, blinding yourselves, you wrap yourselves up in the extra cloth of your long and extravagant shirts, you bury your delicate and tender hands in your abundant and flowing sleeves.”⁴⁹ The feminine habits of these *militia saeculari* hindered their ability to do battle.

⁴²Ibid., 96: “non est discretio, sed confusio, sterilem quae non parit pascere, id est, inutilis carnis concupiscentiis inservire, et viduae nil boni facere, animae videlicet excolendis virtutibus nullam operam dare.”

⁴³Ibid., 99: “. . . non quidem corporis infirmantis ruinas reficere pro incommodo, sed carnis luxuriantis curam perficere in desiderio.”

⁴⁴Ibid., 99–100: “Rogo quae est haec securitas, inter freudentium undique hostium fulgurantes hastas et circumvolantia spicula, tamquam finito iam bello et triumphato adversario, proicere arma, et aut prandiis incubare longioribus, aut nudum molli voluntari in lectulo? Quid hoc ignaviae est, o boni milites? Sociis in sanguine et caede versantibus, vos aut cibos diligitis delicatos, aut somnos capitibus matutinos?”

⁴⁵Ibid., 99: “Sociis in sanguine et caede versantibus. . .”

⁴⁶The dating of *De laude novae militiae* is uncertain, but Bernard possibly wrote it around the year 1130. See Malcolm Barber, “Introduction,” in *In Praise of the New Knighthood: A Treatise on the Knights Templar and the Holy Places of Jerusalem by Bernard of Clairvaux* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, [1977] 2000), 12–13.

⁴⁷*De laude novae militiae*, SBO 3, 216.

⁴⁸Ibid., 216: “Militaria sunt haec insignia, an muliebria potius ornamenta?”

⁴⁹Ibid., 216: “. . . vos, per contrarium oculorum gravamen ritu femineo comam nutritis, longis ac profusis camisiis propria vobis vestigia obvolvitis, delicatas ac teneras manus amplis et circumfluentibus manicis sepelitis.”

Bernard's differentiation between a virtuous Cistercian space and the sinful world outside allows us to understand his criticism of Cluny's churches as a gendered critique. Heavily adorned buildings also affected monks. Not only did they distract the monk, thus impeding and weakening their devotion, but decoration of all types also served the world.⁵⁰ Bernard connects ornamentation to worldly vices in the following:

because they [bishops] are under obligation to the wise and the foolish, they use bodily ornaments to rouse the devotion of carnal people not capable of spiritual things. Truly we who now have left such people ought to have abandoned anything valuable and beautiful of the world for the sake of Christ, everything beautifully shining, soothing melodies, pleasant scents, sweet tasting, pleasing to the touch, lastly all bodily pleasures we have judged as dung so we might gain Christ. Who, I ask, do we intend to arouse in devotion by these things? What, I say, do we seek from delight in these things: the admiration of fools or the gifts of the simple? Indeed, now that we have been mixed among the gentiles, perhaps we have learned by their works, and hence we serve their idols.⁵¹

Here, Bernard articulates a list of differences between the world and its people and the monastery and monks. People of the world are carnal, unspiritual, and simple fools who are only aroused to devotion in as much as they were struck by religious decoration. They are gentiles, whereas monks are God's chosen people. This ornamentation moved monks toward the world and away from spiritual practices, enslaving them to the concerns of flesh. Bernard's verbs indicate movement and change. In this passage, he uses the perfect tense to imply that the Black Monks had abandoned their monastic virtue. They had at one time deemed ornamentation to be "dung," but now they mixed with the gentiles whose world now influenced the monks, rather than the ideals of their monastic forebears.⁵²

Bernard and other Cistercians used similar themes to distinguish the world from the cloister. In a letter to Fulk, who had promised to join a group of regular canons but wavered, Bernard urges Fulk to fulfill his promise by contrasting an effeminate city life with the monastery. Fulk, Bernard urges, must abandon the feminine superfluities of his city life. He exhorts, "let us be content by clothes which are just for covering, not

⁵⁰*Apologia*, SBO 3, 104: "Omitto oratoriorum immensas altitudines, immoderatas longitudines, supervacuas latitudines, sumptuosas depolitiones, curiosas depictiones, quae dum in se orantium retorquent aspectum, impediunt et affectum, et mihi quodammodo repraesentant antiquuum ritum Iudaeorum."

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 104–105: "Et quidem alia causa est episcoporum, alia monachorum. Sciamus namque quod illi, sapientibus et insipientibus debitores cum sint, carnalis populi devotionem, quia spiritualibus non possunt, corporalibus excitant ornamentis. Nos vero qui iam de populo exivimus, qui mundi quaeque pretiosa ac speciosa pro Christo reliquimus, qui omnia pulchra lucentia, canore mulcentia, suave olentia, dulce sapientia, tactu placentia, cuncta denique oblectamenta corporea arbitrari sumus ut stercora, ut Christum lucrifaciamus, quorum, quaeso, in his devotionem excitare intendimus? Quem, inquam, ex his fructum requirimus: stultorum admirationem, an simplicium oblationem? An quoniam commixti sumus inter gentes, forte didicimus opera eorum, et servimus adhuc sculptilibus eorum?"

⁵²Bernard uses "*arbitrari sumus*" to indicate that the furnishings he criticized in traditional Benedictine monasteries had at one time been deemed "dung." Similarly, when Bernard wrote "now that we have been mixed among the gentiles," he used "*commixti sumus*" to express an entanglement with the "gentiles" in the world that had at one time not existed. Finally, he employed "*didicimus*" to suggest that monks now learned from and were formed by the world and its material concerns. See previous note for the Latin passage. *Ibid.*, 104–105.

for wantonness, nor for pride, nor to try to imitate or impress foolish women.”⁵³ He continues to insult Fulk’s masculinity by calling him a “delicate soldier” who deserted his comrades in the fight for heaven so he could strut about the markets and streets of the city clothed in purple cloth and fine linen.⁵⁴ Bernard calls on him to “take up arms, man up, while the battle still rages. . . then you will not be unfamiliar to glory or to battle. If Christ recognizes you in the fray, he will recognize you in heaven.”⁵⁵ As long as Fulk avoided ascetic battle and remained in the city, he threatened his own salvation.

For Bernard, concerns about the body and the exterior person diminished by cultivating the virtues.⁵⁶ Bernard’s oppositional conceptualization of vice and virtue encompassed the primary meaning of *virtus* as manliness. In addition, this gendered contrast between vice and virtue contained a spatial element. By remaining in the city, Fulk exposed himself to the feminine allures of finery. In this weakened state, Fulk would not be able to repel the vices. Because of his youthful concern for luxury, he forfeited his masculinity by not following through with his promise to flee the world. Bernard combined notions of gender and space to explain the threat to Fulk’s soul. In these passages, Bernard contrasts the city with the cloister; the city made one effeminate and cowardly with its luxurious concern for the flesh, while the cloister was a place of masculine prowess and ascetic battle. If Fulk would only leave the world for the cloister, he would learn to be a virtuous monastic soldier.

Bernard employs a language that associated the flesh with feminine concerns of the world and contrasted this with the front lines of the monastery where a new recruit joins the war against the vices. In Bernard’s schema, those he criticized clung to worldliness when they should have fully embraced the cloistered life. Bernard instilled a distinction between the world and monastery in which Cistercian cultural ideals set the standard of monastic practice. He used a traditional language about worldliness, vice and virtue, and spiritual warfare to differentiate the Cistercians from other monastic groups. However, he and other Cistercians inflected this traditional language with a gendered quality to criticize their rivals for being childish and feminine, rather than masculine, ascetic warriors. Concern for the flesh ran counter to the practice of the ancient monks and apostles who, as Bernard says in reference to extravagant clothing, had no time for “childish fits (*pueriliter gestire*).”⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Bernard claims the monks of his day had abandoned “the virtue of the ancient religion.”⁵⁸ Through their adornment, they signaled the softness of their souls, their concern for the body, and their lack of virtue.⁵⁹ For Cistercians, the vices of the feminine world, with its concern for the flesh, threatened the monastery

⁵³*Epistola* 2, SBO 7, 21: “Sic ergo nos contenti simus vestimentis quibus operiamur, non quibus lasciviamus, non quibus superbiamus, non quibus mulierculis vel similari, vel placere studeamus.”

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 22: “Quid agis in urbe, delicate miles? Commilitones tui, quos fugiens deseruisti, pugnant et vincunt, pulsant et intrant, caelum rapiunt et regnant, et tu, sedens super ambulatorem tuum, indutus purpura et bysso, circuis plateas, vicos perambulas?”

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 22: “Sume arma, resume vires, dum adhuc proelium durat. . . Fac, quaeso, te prius sciri, fac te prius videri, ne tunc nesciaris ad gloriam, sciaris autem ad poenam. Si te Christus agnoscit in bello, recognoscet in caelo et, sicut promisit, manifestabit tibi seipsum, si tamen et tu, paenitendo, respiscendo, talem te exhibueris, ut cum fiducia dicere possis: “Tunc cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.””

⁵⁶*Apologia*, SBO 3, 102: “Non tanto curaretur corporis cultus, nisi prius neglecta fuisset mens inculca virtutibus.”

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 102: “. . . ac iam religionis antiquae non solum virtutem amisimus, sed nec speciem retinemus.”

⁵⁹*Ibid.*: “Mollia indumenta animi mollietatem indicant. Non tanto curaretur corporis cultus, nisi prius neglecta fuisset mens inculca virtutibus.”

and destroyed masculine virtue. According to Bernard, this had happened among traditional Benedictines. The ornamentation found on their buildings and their bodies signaled their laxity. Conversely, when new recruits converted to the Cistercians, they began a process of masculinization, leaving behind their childish, feminine flesh.

II. The Gendered Logic of Ascetic Maturation

The twelfth century saw extensive religious transformations that changed both the language and symbolism Christian authors used to explain and conceptualize their thought and practice. Monastic groups began to move away from child oblation in favor of adult converts. At the same time, the push for clerical celibacy meant that monks and clerics more and more stressed that “their identities lay first and foremost within the ecclesiastical sphere. . . a sphere increasingly marked out not just by their religious status but also by celibacy.”⁶⁰ This meant that the language of family, gender, and sexuality took on a new importance in religious discourse.⁶¹

These changes were part of a broader social transformation that undercut traditional warrior masculinities, precipitating the construction of alternative ideas of manly power and authority.⁶² Scholars of gender and monasticism have generally understood monastic gender to be non-masculine. In *Jesus as Mother*, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that Cistercian authors used maternal imagery to articulate pastoral concerns and anxiety about their authority, a development that was part of a broader “feminization of religious language.”⁶³ Since Bynum’s work, scholars have offered a range of interpretations about the gender of medieval celibate men. Some argue that the celibate cleric or monk was “emasculine” or subordinate, or a third gender in relation to lay masculinities.⁶⁴ In these works, celibate men were something “other” than real men because they abstained from sexual activity.⁶⁵ Conversely, others have argued that celibates represented an

⁶⁰Kathleen G. Cushing, *Reform and the Papacy in the Eleventh Century: Spirituality and Social Change* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 35.

⁶¹I understand gender to be the iterative process of repeated performances of established norms through social interactions. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), 60. On the Church as mother and spiritual fatherhood, see Megan McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000–1122* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶²See Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–30.

⁶³Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 135–146.

⁶⁴R. N. Swanson, “Angels Incarnate: Clergy and masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 160–177; P. H. Cullum, “Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, 178–196, especially page 194; Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 17; Jacqueline Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” in *Gender & Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, eds. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34–51.

⁶⁵Importantly, Martha Newman demonstrates that with growing sacerdotal influence in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, some Cistercian monks and nuns stressed their difference from secular clerics by emphasizing the similarities in their monastic practices, thus collapsing some gender distinctions. This, however, is in relation to priestly versus monastic practice, and not in relation to expressions of lay genders. See Martha G. Newman, *Cistercian Stories for Nuns and Monks: The Sacramental Imagination of Engelhard of Langheim* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

extreme masculinity expressed through a constant battle against lust.⁶⁶ In these interpretations, manly monks needed sexual temptation to prove their masculinity.

The scholarship on monastic gender has generally focused on adults, with little attention to the ways age and gender intersect in constructions of gendered adulthoods. Cistercian monasticism, however, especially as articulated by Bernard of Clairvaux and those under his influence, provides particularly fruitful material with which to investigate the role of childhood and youth in the formation of gendered adults. I take as my starting point not the standard medieval duality of male and female to understand the ways monastic men were made, but instead that of the child and the masculine adult. Indeed, Cistercian descriptions of childhood and youthfulness often resembled their understandings of femaleness, so that the imagined “child” represented a non-masculine state in relation to a mature, masculine monk. Cistercian language describing the “abbot as mother” presupposes a “child” to be nurtured; otherwise, the metaphor loses its power. Furthermore, neither the bride nor the abbot as mother were gendered expressions meant for every monk. As Bynum made clear, elite monks in authoritative positions utilized the metaphor of the “abbot as mother.”⁶⁷ Likewise, Bernard stressed that it was primarily expert monks who experienced the bridegroom.⁶⁸ Conversely, childhood comprised a ubiquitous Cistercian metaphor, as the monk had to *grow* and *mature* before gaining the requisite experience to glimpse the bedchamber. Bynum acknowledged the widespread use of the nursing child as a Cistercian metaphor for the soul, even more commonplace than references to God’s breasts.⁶⁹ Despite this, the role of the “monk child” in Cistercian gendered discourse has yet to be studied sufficiently.

The Cistercians imagined “childhood” both as a starting point for spiritual development but also as a contrasting category to the masculine, mature monk. By taking into account how Cistercians constructed gendered adulthoods using notions of childhood and maturation, we find that what has been treated as spiritual metaphors and meditations—which used the language of motherhood, marriage, and the military—also concretely shaped practices of monastic organization, formation, and bodies, not to mention Cistercian public identity as they jockeyed for influence within the newly competitive monastic landscape.⁷⁰ The child was not only a metaphor but corresponded to hierarchical distinctions within the monastery based on experience, discipline, and the length of one’s monastic tenure.

⁶⁶Maureen C. Miller, “Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era,” *Church History* 72, no.1 (2003): 28; Jacqueline Murray, “Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity,” in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, eds. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2004), 24–42; see also Ruth Mazo Karras, “Thomas Aquinas’s Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe,” in *Gender & Christianity in Medieval Europe*, 52–67; and Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 40.

⁶⁷Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 147, 154–159.

⁶⁸See *Sermones Super Cantica 1*, SBO 1, 8.

⁶⁹Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 150.

⁷⁰The metaphorical dimension of Cistercian gendered imagery has been addressed by many scholars, and indeed this study adds to complexities of Cistercian gendered metaphors. For example, see Shawn M. Krahrmer, “The Virile Bride of Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Church History* 69.2 (2000) 304–327; Engh, *Gendered Identities*, 13; Katherine Allen Smith, “Spiritual Warriors,” 95.

The act of conversion took on a special significance for Cistercians. By choosing to leave the world of their own volition and entering a time of testing in the novitiate, new recruits began the process of training their body and adapting to the rigors of their new life. The Cluniacs, given that many of their recruits had been child oblates and grown up in the monastery, had all but abandoned the one-year probationary period of the novitiate prescribed in the *Rule of Benedict*.⁷¹ This meant that, for the Cistercians, descriptions of monastic experience and ascetic ability often carried connotations associated with age. Similarly, those who wrote to or about new recruits often focused on training the body, describing the bodily differences between new recruits and mature monks in gendered terms.

For new Cistercian recruits, their worldly bodies posed a problem. Bernard, in his sermon *On Conversion*, preaching to a group of clerics in Paris around 1140, claims that “At worst, the soul sees itself contaminated, not by another, but by its own body, not from another place than from itself.”⁷² He goes on to argue that it was insanity to feed barrenness, “to fatten and cherish a rotten carcass, which without a doubt is about to be food for worms in a little time from now.”⁷³ Despite his claims that “the body, which is corruptible, weighs down the soul,” Bernard then asserts “That is not the fault of the body, because certainly this is a body of death; moreover it is the flesh which is a body of sin, in that there is no good thing [in it], but rather the rule of sin.”⁷⁴ Likewise, earlier he writes, “For where no body exists, there will be no action. Truly where there is no action, no satisfaction can be reached.”⁷⁵ While anxiety inducing, the body, Bernard found, was necessary to salvation: it only needed to be trained.⁷⁶

The Cistercians understood ascetic training to be a process of casting off the feminine, worldly flesh as the monk cultivated a masculine ascetic body. William of St.-Thierry writes that Bernard told zealous novices that, “If anyone is in a hurry to enter this place, you must abandon the bodies brought from your time in the world (*saeculo*). Only spirits may enter; the flesh (*caro*) is not useful.”⁷⁷ William claims Bernard’s maxim frightened the novices because of their “tenderness.”⁷⁸ William connects *saeculo* and *caro* in his choice of a word that carries feminine connotations, *teneritudini*. He, thus, merges fleshliness with tenderness while suggesting the pliability of the novice’s body and hinting at the contrast with the opposite: the masculine, hard, mature disposition of experienced monks. Both Bernard and William distinguish

⁷¹See note 6 above.

⁷²*Ad clericos de conversione*, SBO 4, 84: “Videt denique anima sese contaminatam, nec per alium, sed per proprium corpus, nec aliunde quam a seipsa.”

⁷³*Ibid.*, 89: “Insanus siquidem labor pascere sterilem quae non parit et viduae benefacere nolle, omittere curam cordis et curam carnis agere in desiderio, impinguare et fovere cadaver putridum, quando paulo post vermium esca futurum nullatenus dubitatur.”

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 106: “Corpus quod corrumpitur, aggravat animam. . . Non utique corporis est culpa, sed huius quod adhuc scilicet corpus mortis, magis autem corpus peccati sit caro, in qua bonum non est, sed potius lex peccati.”

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 77: “Ubi enim deerit corpus, actus non erit. Sane ubi nulla fuerit actio, nec satisfactio quidem ulla poterit inveniri.”

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 79: “quae postmodum evanescit, quando iam exercitatos habenti sensus certamen forte datur.”

⁷⁷William of St.-Thierry, Arnold of Bonneval, and Geoffrey of Auxerre, *Vita Prima Sancti Bernardi Claraevallis Abbatis*, CCCM 89 B, 48: “Si ad ea quae intus sunt festinatis hic, hic foris dimittite corpora quae de saeculo attulistis. Soli spiritus ingredientur; caro non prodest quidquam.” Works in the series *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*, 372 vols. (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 1966–), are abbreviated herein as “CCCM.”

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 48: “Quod cum nouitiis ad nouitatem uerbi perterritis, parcens teneritudini eorum. . .”

between the body (*corpus*) and the flesh (*caro*). The body, for Bernard, was essential for progressing in the monastic life and making satisfaction for sin. He understood the flesh, however, as a source of sin that had to be overcome. In as much as the monk progressively overcame temptations, he subjected the body to the spirit, making it an instrument of salvation. This formulation constructs a hierarchy between the worldly, fleshy bodies of new recruits and masculine monastic bodies. Both Bernard and William switch from the standard gender-neutral word for bodies, *corpus/corpora*, to the feminine word *caro* for flesh when contrasting the spirit and the body. The latter, in an undignified way, connotes meat, the flesh, and fleshy, soft parts. As Jacques Le Goff shows, the meaning of *caro* changed in the twelfth century and took on a direct association with vice.⁷⁹ While Le Goff contends that the “flesh” primarily signified sexual sins, Karma Lochrie demonstrates that medieval theologians held a much broader understanding of the relationship of the “flesh” to the body and soul. Lochrie argues that the flesh, as distinct from the body, signified “woman” and as such everything excessive, disruptive, permeable, and susceptible. In essence, the flesh/woman “stood for all the heaving powers allied against the spirit (emphasis mine).”⁸⁰ By associating new recruits, who were “children” in their monastic life, with the feminine flesh, the flesh can describe the abstract notion of the “child” or “youth” just as much as it did that of “woman,” while signifying a condition associated with the “world.” In this schema, the will and reason governed a masculine body, while the whims of the senses steered the feminine flesh.

Any excess represented the feminine and threatened the masculinity of monks. In 1142, in his *De speculo caritatis* (*On the Mirror of Charity*), a treatise on monastic formation and an apology for Cistercian austerity aimed at beginners, Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167) writes that foul pleasure “contaminates the flesh, and effeminates the mind, whatever is honorable in the soul, whatever is beautiful, and at worst whatever is manly is equally crushed and destroyed.”⁸¹ He asserts that decorations in the cloister are “womanly pleasures.”⁸² Likewise, monks who engage in overcomplicated chant resemble women as “sometimes manly vigor has been cast aside, and [the voice] is constricted into the shrillness of a woman’s voice.”⁸³ Indeed, Aelred suggests that vocal embellishments are not simply inappropriate but a public humiliation, as lay folks travel to jeer at the lascivious gesticulations of the monks trying to hit their notes. He goes on to suggest that the “whorish” quality of this type of chant turns the oratory into a theater.⁸⁴ Conversely, chant should be marked by moderation and *gravitas*.⁸⁵ Fleshly

⁷⁹Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, 96.

⁸⁰Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 3–4.

⁸¹Aelred of Rievaulx, *De speculo caritatis*, CCCM 1, 43: “Nam de eius foeditate quid dicendum cum haec sordidissima lues et carnem contaminet, et mentem effeminet, ac quidquid in animo honestum, quidquid decorum, quidquid denique uirile est obruat pariter et euertat.”

⁸²Ibid., 99: “Inde etiam in claustris monachorum grues et lepores, damulae et cerui, picae et corui, non quidem Antoniana et Machariana instrumenta, sed muliebria oblectamenta: quae omnia nequaquam monachorum paupertati consulunt, sed curiosorum oculos pascunt.”

⁸³Ibid., 98: “. . . aliquando uirili uigore deposita, in femineae uocis gracilitates acuitur. . .”

⁸⁴Ibid.: “Stans interea uulgus sonitum follium, crepitum cymbalorum, harmoniam fistularum tremens attonitusque miratur; sed lasciuas cantantium gesticulationes, meretricias uocum alternationes et infractiones non sine cachinno risuque intuetur, ut eos non ad oratorium, sed ad theatrum, nec ad orandum, sed ad spectandum aestimes conuenisse.”

⁸⁵Ibid.: “Ideoque talis debet esse sonus, tam moderatus, tam grauis. . .”

excess, whether in food, decoration, or song, could infiltrate monastic space through lax practice, feminizing monks and making them worldly.

The unchecked flesh also bred disordered attachments. Attachments understood rightly, through reason, might help the monk progress, but irrational and physical attachments spelled ruin for the new recruit.⁸⁶ In the *Mirror of Charity*, Aelred explains the dangers of attachment through a web of associations that combined vice, beastliness, and childishness with the flesh and the “world” as ways of expressing the nature of disordered affection. In speaking of the dangers of attachments, Aelred writes that “attachment always suggests those things that are soft and pleasant; it eagerly embraces that which is pleasing, tender, delightful, and delicate. It flees and avoids anything truly arduous, harsh, anything against the will, in complete terror.”⁸⁷ This type of attachment perverts proper love and destroys reason, making the monk more animal than human.⁸⁸ “This love,” Aelred continues, “is especially suited to beasts, and is excused in children; for reason has not been poured out on the former, and is dormant in the latter.”⁸⁹

Aelred goes on to directly connect this irrational, soft, bestial, childish attachment to worldliness, lust, and the flesh, all of which unmanned the monk. “Therefore, anyone who loves their soul according to attachment, loves it in this world because he loves it in the lust of the flesh, in the lust of the eyes, and in the pride of life, attachment suggests all of these things.”⁹⁰ Aelred laments the prevalence of this type of worldliness in the church. He claims,

To enter the houses of some of our bishops, and more shameful, of monks, is like entering Sodom and Gamorrah. Effeminate and coiffured young men parade about dressed like a man-whore with their buttocks half-naked. Scripture says about them: And they have placed the children in a brothel.⁹¹

For Aelred, attachments to luxury were irrational and dehumanized, infantilized, or otherwise unmanned the monk or cleric. He understood this condition to indicate worldliness and the flesh so that each at once signified the other. The beastly or childish monk was also worldly, effeminate and under the influence of the flesh. As part of Aelred’s broader apology for Cistercian strictness, these associations built on Cistercian themes that presented them as masculine, mature, and pious in contrast to their rivals.

⁸⁶Following Elizabeth Connor in her translation of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *The Mirror of Charity* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), I have opted to use “attachment” for the word *affectus* and its variants. *Affectus* is famously multivalent in its twelfth-century meanings. See Damien Boquet, *L’ordre de l’affect au Moyen Âge: autour de l’anthropologie affective d’Aelred de Rievaulx* (Caen, France: Publications du CRAHM, 2005). See also Boquet’s treatment in English, “Affectivity in the Spiritual Writings of Aelred of Rievaulx,” in *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)*, ed. Marsha L Dutton (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017), 167–196.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 134: “Semper etenim affectus iste mollia suggerit et suauiā; quod iucundum, quod tenerum, quod uoluptuosum, quod delicatum libenter amplectitur; quod uero arduum, quod asperum, quod uoluntati contrarium, omni horrore refugit et euitat.”

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*: “Hic amor proprie conuenit bestiis, excusatur in pueris; nam illis ratio non infunditur, in istis sopitur.”

⁹⁰*Ibid.*: “Qui itaque animam suam secundum affectum amat, in hoc mundo amat, quia in concupiscentia carnis, in concupiscentia oculorum, in superbia uitae, quae omnia affectus suggerit, amat.”

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 135: “Sic est ingredi domos quorundam episcoporum nostrorum, et quod magis pudet, cuculatorum, quasi quis ingrediatur Sodomam et Gomorrhā. Procedunt quidam capillati et effeminati seminudis natibus cultu meretricio, de qualibus Scriptura: Et posuerunt, inquit, pueros in prostibulo.”

III. The Cistercian Imagined Child and Monastic Formation

Not only could childhood and youth indicate the lack of masculine discipline, they provided a model for conceptualizing monastic advancement. Age and ascetic development are inextricably linked to the formation of Christian identities. Referencing baptism in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be “born again” in the spirit in order to see the kingdom of God.⁹² Similarly, in his teaching on humility in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus explains to his disciples that “unless you be converted and become as little children you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”⁹³ Paul also often used childhood to explain the differences between a Christian’s former life and their life as a believer. After exhorting the Ephesians to stop being like children, who are easily deceived, he admonishes them to “put off” the corrupted “old man” in favor of the “new man” dedicated to holiness.⁹⁴ He then urges the Ephesians to be “followers of God, as most dear children.”⁹⁵ Paul also conflates childhood, carnality, and worldliness in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3 when he claims that the Corinthians were still mired in the ways of the world. Paul, accordingly, gives them “milk” as nourishment as they were not yet able to take spiritual “meat.” Though early Christian writers used age, particularly childhood, in multivalent ways, they often connected the metaphor of childhood to explain conversion, morality and discipline, communal and personal identity, and, finally, to describe maturation in the Christian faith. That is, Christians used “childhood” to conceptualize conversion and identity formation. To leave the world behind, the Christian became not just a “child of God,” but was “born again” and had to learn a new way of living, just like a child.

Bernard and the Cistercians drew on this long-established Christian rhetoric of “childhood” in similar ways to construct to explain ideal monastic behavior. Returning to Bernard’s letter to Robert, Bernard, in part, blamed Robert’s flight on Robert’s youthfulness, and described his behavior as childish. He lamented, “I was too harsh with the delicate youth (*adolescuntulo*), and I treated the tender one in an excessively severe, barbarous way.”⁹⁶ However, he claims he ought to be excused for his excessiveness “because the petulance of childhood (*pueritiae*) having been stirred, had thus been restrained, and also at the beginning those disciplines must have been harsh for someone of such unformed years.”⁹⁷ Bernard presents Robert’s youth as a primary motivation in his decision to leave Clairvaux, while excusing his own overzealous rule by explaining that it corrected Robert’s childishness.

Robert’s age during this episode cannot be established with certainty. Robert apparently attempted to enter Cîteaux with Bernard and his other companions in 1112/13. In the letter, however, Bernard writes that Robert’s admittance into Cîteaux had been delayed for two years because of his “tenderness.”⁹⁸ Robert then likely joined Bernard at Cîteaux around 1114 where he probably completed his year-long

⁹²John 3:1–12 (DRA).

⁹³Matthew 18:3. This explanation prefaced the fourth of five Matthean discourses, known as the “Discourse on the Church.” This discourse explains the author of Matthew’s understanding of communal ethics, including how Jesus’ moral vision departed from that of the world.

⁹⁴Ephesians 4:14, 22–24.

⁹⁵Ephesians 5:1.

⁹⁶*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 2: “Delicato quippe adolescentulo austerus existiteram, et tenerum durus nimis inhumane tractavi.”

⁹⁷*Ibid.*: “Possem forsitan excusare et dicere, quia sic lascivi pueritiae motus coercendi erant, ac rudibus annis debebantur aspera illa disciplinae districtioris initia. . .”

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 7: “Quaesiisti, petisti, pulsasti; sed pro tui adhuc teneritudine, te licet invito, dilatus es per biennium.”

probationary period.⁹⁹ He then followed Bernard to Clairvaux, perhaps as part of the founding party in 1115, and he left Clairvaux sometime after 1116 and before 1120.¹⁰⁰ This means that, after his year of probation, Robert likely made his profession at the age of sixteen at Cîteaux in 1115. Bernard's letter refers to the time that Bernard served as Robert's abbot, which would have been from Robert's sixteenth year on. Given this possible chronology Robert could have been anywhere between seventeen and twenty-one when he left Clairvaux.¹⁰¹ Bernard then would have written to Robert when Robert was in his early to mid-twenties. At the time of the letter, even the events described in the letter under Bernard's rule at Clairvaux, Robert was young, but hardly a child. Bernard often referred to Robert with the term *adulescentulus* and its variables, but usually to indicate Robert's life-stage as a young adult. When chastising Robert, Bernard invoked *pueritia* (childhood) and called him a *puer* (child). Indeed, twelfth-century monks understood the life-stage of *adolescentia* in various ways. On the one hand, abbot Peter the Venerable (r. 1122–1156) decreed that Cluniac monks up to the age of twenty ought to remain in the monastic school, among the children.¹⁰² On the other hand, early twelfth-century monks considered those who had reached puberty to have entered adulthood and understood *adolescentia* to be part of the broader life-phase of adulthood.¹⁰³ Bernard thought of Robert as a young adult, but one who acted like a child in seeking out an easier life.

As part of his rhetorical use of "childhood," Bernard deploys the language of sonship to express his own authority. He pleads for Robert to return, writing, "You see, son, how I desire to lead you, not in a spirit of slavery and fear, but in a spirit of the adoption of sons."¹⁰⁴ In fashioning himself as Robert's "father," a traditional monastic metaphor, Bernard repeatedly denigrates Robert's decision to flee to Cluny as the behavior of a young child. In an exhortation for God to intervene in the situation, Bernard blames Robert's youth for the "hot-bloodedness and insolence" of his decision, calling him a "foolish child" for abandoning his Cistercian vow.¹⁰⁵ Bernard then, quoting Proverbs

⁹⁹According to John the Hermit's revision of the *Life of Bernard*, known as the *Vita quarta*, Robert had lived as a monk for 67 years at the time of his writing sometime between 1180 and 1182. *Vita quarta sancti Bernardi abbatis duobus libris scripta a Joanne Eremita*, PL 185:537d. On the dating of the *Vita Quarta*, see Elphège Vacandard, *Vie de Saint Bernard*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1895), xliii–xliv; see also Adriaan H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 77; and Pierre-Gilles Girault, "Robert de Châtillon, saint Bernard, et les débuts de l'abbaye de Noirlac," *Cahiers d'archéologie et d'histoire du Berry* 136 (1998): 62–63.

¹⁰⁰Holdsworth, "The Early Writings of Bernard of Clairvaux," 58.

¹⁰¹For a possible chronology of Robert's life see Girault, "Robert de Châtillon," 64–66. Girault places Robert's departure from Clairvaux at the age of seventeen. Wim Verbaal, however, places Robert's flight in 1119 during Bernard's extended absence from Clairvaux to convalesce. If this dating is correct, Robert would have been around 19 or 20 when he left Clairvaux. See Wim Verbaal, "Voicing your Voice: The Fiction of a Life. Early Twelfth-Century Letter Collections and the Case of Bernard of Clairvaux," *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures* 4 (2017): 119, n. 41, <https://riviste.unimi.it/interfaces/article/view/7620/8996> (accessed May 31, 2022).

¹⁰²Isabelle Cochelein, "Adolescence Uncloistered (Cluny, Early Twelfth Century)," in *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change*, eds. Isabelle Cochelein and Karen Smyth (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2013), 148.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 151, 167–170.

¹⁰⁴*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 3: "Vide, fili, quam te cupiam duci, non spiritu servitutis iterum in timore, sed spiritu adoptionis filiorum. . ."

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 6: "Puto enim, quantum expertus sum, adolescentis per se satis ferventis et insolescentis nec corpori talia expedire fomenta, nec menti illa gloriae tentamenta"; *Ibid.*, 7: "O insensate puer! Quis te fascinavit non solvere vota tua, quae distinxerunt labia tua?"

1:10, implores Robert, his “little son” to not give in to the enticements of sinners.¹⁰⁶ In this last example, Bernard asserts his authority by replacing the standard “my son (*fili mi*)” of the Vulgate with the infantilizing diminutive “little son (*filiolo*).” Bernard also uses this language in his letter to Fulk. In the same way he belittles Fulk by calling him a “foolish child,” though Bernard admitted that Fulk was “a child more in sense than age!”¹⁰⁷ Bernard claimed that though mother Charity “took him up to her own maternal breast of milk,” Fulk prematurely weaned himself, and “spewed out the well-tested sweetness of that milk.”¹⁰⁸ For both Robert and Fulk it was childish foolishness that led them to abandon their ascetic battles.

Bernard relied on this language of childhood not only to prod Robert and Fulk, but also to explain both the monk’s relationship to the abbot and spiritual maturation. Bernard uses intimate parenting terms to differentiate the authority and nature of the abbot from that of others in the community. He writes to Robert:

And I say these things, son, not that I might upset you, but that I might warn, so to speak, a dearest son, though you might have many pedagogues in Christ, [you do not have] many fathers. Consider this, I begot you in religion by my word and example, then I nursed you with milk, which, as yet only a small child, was all you were able to take, and I would have given you bread if you had waited to grow up. But, alas, how ill-timed and too hastily you were weaned!¹⁰⁹

Importantly here Bernard’s notion of fatherhood encompasses both the masculine act of “begetting” and motherly nurturing.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Christians at times connected the image of the nursing father to the masculinizing spiritual nourishment associated with education and salvation.¹¹¹ Drawing on these traditional images, Bernard spiritualizes childhood, turning it into a metaphor for progress in the monastic life and a basis for communal hierarchy.

While Bernard leveraged his notion of childhood in order to insult lax practice, explain authority, and construct mature masculinity, he also employed childhood as a way to describe the process of monastic maturation. He understood those who had recently left the world for the cloister to be like little children. Under monastic guidance new recruits gradually conquered their worldly carnality. Bernard quotes Paul to describe the men he had recruited to the Cistercians. He combines Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians with those of 1 Peter 2:2 and Galatians 3:25 when he writes that

¹⁰⁶*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 7: “Filiolo, si te lactaverint peccatores, ne acquiescas eis.”

¹⁰⁷*Epistola 2*, SBO 7, 13: “O puer insensate! O puer magis sensus quam aetate!”

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*: “Audi: In eo procul dubio, quod te, quem sinu suo lacte nutriendum materno susceperat, ante tempus ablactasti; quod expertam lactis dulcedinem, in quo posses crescere in salutem, tam leviter, tam celeriter exsufflasti.”

¹⁰⁹*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 8: “Et haec dico, fili, non ut te confundam, sed ut tamquam filium carissimum moneam, quia, etsi multos habeas in Christo paedagogoas, sed non multos patres. Nam, si dignaris, et verbo, et exemplo meo in religionem ego te genui. Nutrivi deinde lacte, quod solum adhuc parvulus capere poterat, daturus et panem, si exspectares ut grandesceres. Sed heu quam praepropere et intempestive ablactatus es!”

¹¹⁰On the abbot as mother’s relation to authority, see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 154–159. Bernard claims he “begot” Robert in religion. In the Vulgate, the Latin verb *gigno*, *gignere*, *genui gentium* is associated with fatherhood. See, for example, the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:2–16.

¹¹¹Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 169.

new recruits are those “who are still little ones in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1) who long for milk (1 Pet. 2:2), [and] as it were [are] living under a master and pedagogue (Gal. 3:25).”¹¹² Understandings of “childhood” began to change around the beginnings of the twelfth century, especially in religious circles. Those in new twelfth-century monastic movements began to stress the importance of consent and conscience in monastic conversion. A child could not consent to the monastic life. Cistercian reasoning in banning oblation reveals a nuanced and particular attention to the nature of childhood and the ways the presence of children affected monks’ lives, possibly stemming from their devotional attention to the humanity of Christ and the Holy Family.¹¹³ Despite the rejection of children in the monastery, imagined “childhood” became central to Cistercian articulations of the monastic life.

Childhood and adulthood are interdependent categories. As Leena Alanen explains, “they stand in a relation of mutual constitution—they reciprocally presume each other.”¹¹⁴ Cistercian authors consistently invoked notions of the “child” and “youthfulness” in opposition to adult, masculine monks. Youthfulness and childhood could denote innocence, naivete, foolishness, weakness, impulsiveness, inexperience, and a range of other qualities that required discipline and the guidance of senior monks. Likewise, Cistercians also invoked childhood to explain ideal humility and innocence, though in the contexts treated in this article, this was rare. By nature of their recent conversion, Cistercians presented new “child” monks as more worldly and thus susceptible to vice than their seniors. New recruits, either actually young or young in their monastic vocation, could be tempted into abandoning their vows either for something “easier,” as did Robert, or for the allurements of the world, like Fulk.

Bernard often used childhood and youthfulness to destabilize masculinity. Indeed, we saw this above in his letters to Robert and Fulk. Similarly, in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard applies this notion of youthfulness and childhood directly to new recruits. In his first sermon, Bernard contrasts mature monks, nourished by spiritual bread, with those who could only take milk. Disciplined, experienced monks had fought temptation, laboriously studied scripture, and meditated day and night on the law of God.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, the “childish (*puerilis*)” and “new recruits (*neophytæ*),” who only recently left the world, were not yet ready for the marriage bed of the Song of Songs.¹¹⁶

In a rebuke of some new recruits in his nineteenth sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard describes the characteristics of new converts in gendered terms that overtly employed age. Rather than adult men, he calls them “little girls (*adulescentulae*)” who were still little ones in Christ. Line Engh understands the “little girls” as those who learn from the Bride in the Song of Songs. In some ways this can be every monk, but, as Engh adeptly demonstrates, Bernard often employs “little girls” to distinguish between those ready for the marriage bed and those who had not yet reached that

¹¹²*Sermo* 8, SBO 6–1, 115: “eorum scilicet, qui parvuli adhuc in Christo lac concupiscunt, tamquam sub magistro et paedagogo viventes.”

¹¹³Brian Patrick McGuire, “Children and youth in monastic life: Western Europe 400–1250 CE,” in *Childhood in History: Perceptions of Children in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, eds. Reidar Aasgaard, Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (London: Routledge 2018), 234–237.

¹¹⁴Leena Alanen, “Generational Order,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 161.

¹¹⁵*Sermones Super Cantica 1*, SBO 1, 3: “nisi frustra forte ex longo studiis estis caelestibus occupati, exercitati sensibus, et in lege Dei meditati die ac nocte.”

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 7–8.

stage in spiritual and ascetic development. While recognizing the presence of the monastic development from immature to mature, Engh instead stresses the feminine weakness of the “little girls,” paying less attention to the ways in which Bernard connects weakness to childhood and youth in this formulation. Bernard’s use of “little girls,” however, symbolizes an inferior femininity because of their inexperience and the associated weakness of their imagined “age.” Bernard’s construction of age, then, is the operational difference between the virile Bride and the feminine and infantilized “little girls.”¹¹⁷ Because of their non-masculine “age,” they lacked a higher understanding of the monastic life. He explains:

All these men love in proportion that they comprehend. But, truly, the little girls, since they understand less, and they comprehend less, are utterly incapable of approaching such sublime things: indeed, they are little children in Christ, they must be suckled with milk and oil.¹¹⁸

He goes on to clarify that these young girls are often those who had recently arrived (*qui nuper venistis*). Bernard complains that despite the community’s efforts to correct their behavior they were “vehemently indiscreet, indeed absolutely intemperate, and exceedingly stubborn.”¹¹⁹ Elsewhere, Bernard remarks that many had flagellated themselves so brutally in the beginning of their monastic life that they could not participate in the liturgy and instead had to spend an extended time being cared for in luxury.¹²⁰ New recruits, like young girls, children, or young boys, were prone to excesses, but they might mature by following the example of the boy Jesus.¹²¹ The twelfth-century pseudo-Bernardine work, the *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* (commonly known as *The Golden Epistle*), that William of St.-Thierry wrote around 1144–1145, makes obvious the mutually constitutive contrast between feminine, childish, worldly new recruits and mature, masculine monks.¹²² William describes new recruits as hot-blooded with a fiery soul, of a labile age, and full of restless curiosity. Experienced monks are mature, manly, serious, chaste, sober, and disgusted by exterior things. These experienced monks possess a tough and strengthened virtue. Conversely, new recruits are unstable, fluid, and effeminate.¹²³

¹¹⁷On the “little girls,” see Engh, *Gendered Identities*, 209–226.

¹¹⁸*Sermones Super Cantica* 19, SBO 1, 112: “Hi ergo omnes, prout capiunt, diligunt. Sed enim adolescentulae, quoniam minus sapiunt, minus et capiunt, nec omnino sufficient ad tam sublimia: parvulae quippe in Christo sunt, lacte et oleo nutriendae.”

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*: “Vel certe magis ex obliquo vos, qui nuper venistis, tangit spiritualis sermo, vestram illam, quam et nos frequenter reprimere conati sumus, minus discretam vehementiam, immo intemperantiam prorsus nimium obstinatam, redarguens.”

¹²⁰*Sermo* 40, SBO 6–1, 241: “Multos vidimus ita in principiis carnem suam verberasse et discretionis infregisse repagula, ut inhabiles laudum sollemniis redderent, et apparatu lautiori diuturnis foverentur temporibus.”

¹²¹*Sermones super cantica* 19, SBO 1, 113: “Non legistis in Evangelio quam formam oboediendi puer Iesus pueris sanctis tradiderit?”

¹²²This work circulated under Bernard’s name from the middle of the twelfth century until the early modern period, to which it owed its significant influence. It is now accepted to have been the work of William of St.-Thierry. See J. M. Déchanet, “Introduction,” in *William of Saint Thierry: The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren of Mont Dieu*, trans. Theodore Berkeley, OCSO, intro. J. M. Déchanet, OSB (Collegetown, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1971), ix–xiv.

¹²³William of St.-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei*, CCCM 88, 268: “Quid sunt haec nisi iuuenem naturaliter et calidus sanguis et feruidus animus, aetas [libidinis/labilis], curiositas inquieta; et uiril

The Cistercians' relied on their gendered understanding of "childhood" to conceptualize their ideal spiritual development. Cistercian writers used the "child" to envisage progress in the monastic life as a masculinizing maturation process. This masculinization involved subduing the flesh as part of growing out of "childhood" and leaving behind the world and feminine vice by cultivating masculine virtue. For example, in his meditation on Jesus's boyhood journey to Jerusalem, *De Iesu Puero Duodenni* (*Jesus at the Age of Twelve*), Aelred relies on Jesus's boyhood to model monastic spiritual advancement.¹²⁴ For Aelred, childhood served as an ideal metaphor for progress in the monastic life.¹²⁵ Throughout the meditation the monk imagines himself following Jesus through Jerusalem, learning from his example to be humble, silent, and obedient, among other monastic virtues. Aelred makes the connection between spiritual maturation and childhood explicit in his section on the allegorical sense of this story. He writes that Jesus became human and grew up

In order that we who by disposition are little children. . . might be born spiritually and grow up and make progress through the distinctive spiritual ages. Thus his [Jesus] bodily growth is our spiritual growth; and the things that are said of him at every age [of his life] are to urge us through each step of progress spiritually. . . Therefore, may his bodily birth be our spiritual birth.¹²⁶

In the treatise, Jesus exemplifies the ideal monastic "child." He was perfectly obedient, humble, silent, and respected his elders. In all of these instances, the boy Jesus represented an ideal model for a junior monk.

New recruits required intimate and caring guidance if they were to grow into mature, masculine monks. In his sermon *De diversis affectionibus animae et diversis secundum ipsas Dei nominibus* (*On the Diverse Affections and Titles of the Soul by which it is under God*), Bernard explains that new recruits were "just like children, they fear they might offend their teacher, lest they receive a beating or be cheated of a small present that that kind instructor uses to entice them."¹²⁷ Bernard characterizes this stage as one of fear and instruction, a time when new recruits learned obedience and the monastic life more generally. As imagined "children," these beginners required not just the authority of a

maturitas, serius animus, castus, sobrius esus, pertaesus exteriorum et intra semetipsum, quantum potest, recondens semetipsum? [. . .] Perfecti enim quique et spirituales, qui turturis nomine designantur, cum ad firmamentum et robur uirtutis suae. . ."

¹²⁴For medieval uses of apocryphal stories of Jesus' childhood, see Mary Dzon, "Boys Will be Boys: The Physiology of Childhood and the Apocryphal Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages," *Viator* 41, no. 1 (2011): 179–226.

¹²⁵For Aelred's consistent use of the child Jesus as a metaphor for the soul, see Robin Gilbank, "The Childhood of Christ and the Infancy of the Soul in Aelred's *De Iesu Puero Duodenni*," in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy, 173–187 (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2008),.

¹²⁶Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Iesu puero duodenni*, CCCM 1, 258–259: "ut nos mente paruuli, immo paene nihili, spiritaliter nasceremur, et per spiritalium aetatum distinctiones cresceremus et proficeremus. Ita eius profectus corporalis, noster est profectus spiritalis, et ea quae ab eo in cunctis aetatibus acta describuntur, in nobis per singulos profectuum gradus spiritaliter agi a bene proficientibus sentiuntur. Sit igitur corporalis eius natiuitas, spiritalis nostrae natiuitatis. . ."

¹²⁷*Sermo* 8, SBO 6–1, 115: ". . . quasi pueriliter timent ne magistrum offendant, ne vapulent, ne fraudentur munusculis, quibus solet eos eruditor ille benignus allicere."

master but also a *paedagogus*, someone to intimately guide them into a mature monastic life.¹²⁸ Bernard explains:

But seeing how narrow and arduous the path is that leads to life, for the little children in Christ a pedagogue is necessary for you, oh little sons, to nourish you; someone who teaches, escorts, and warms you, who frolics with the little children, so to speak, and also consoles them with certain caresses, lest that fragile time of life be ruined.¹²⁹

In time, however, the new recruit ought to leave behind this fragile stage as he developed in competence. In the next stage, Bernard, drawing on the apostle Paul, explains that monks put away childish things, hunger for solid spiritual food, and concern themselves with their inheritance, that is eternal life and for most mature, the bedchamber of the bridegroom.¹³⁰

For Bernard, monastic maturation meant learning through battle. For new monks, this was primarily a battle to discipline the body. In a letter written around 1140, Bernard responded to a request in which Malachy (d. 1148), the former archbishop of Armagh, asked Bernard to send two of Malachy's companions back to Ireland to help pick a site for his new Cistercian establishment of Mellifont. Bernard responded, "we thought the appropriate thing was to not separate them from us until Christ is fully formed in them, until the battles of the Lord are taught to these new troops by combat."¹³¹ In his parable, *De filio regis* (*On the Son of the King*), Bernard casts the progression he explains in the *De diversis affectionibus* as a dramatic rescue mission and battle in which virtues liberate the young, main character before engaging in a war with the vices. Bernard's parables were accessible short stories meant for beginners that couched spiritual and monastic themes in language that would have been familiar to new recruits, especially those who had left behind lay lives as warriors, as most of the parables in some way deal with battle.¹³² The parables, then, are a source where we find Bernard showing recruits how to understand their newfound subordinate position within the monastery, how to conceptualize monastic practice, and how to imagine their future life as monks.

¹²⁸In Western antiquity a *paedagogus* supervised a family's children, accompanied them throughout the day, including to and from school, disciplined them, and taught them appropriate behavior. See J. V. Muir, "Education, Roman," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edn., online edn. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001. For Christian discourse about pedagogues, see Galatians 3:24–25; see also Jerome of Stridon, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Andrew Cain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 150–151.

¹²⁹*Sermo* 8, SBO 6–1, 116: "Sed quoniam arta et ardua via est quae ducit ad vitam, tamquam parvulis in Christo paedagogus vobis, o filioli, ac nutritius necessarius est, qui doceat, deducat, foveat vos, et tamquam alludat parvulis ac blanditiis quibusdam consoletur, ne pereat aetas infirma."

¹³⁰For the final two stages, see *Ibid.*, 116–117.

¹³¹*Epistola* 341, SBO 8, 282–283: "Quod autem voluistis duos de fratribus mitti vobis ad praevidendum locum, communicato cum fratribus consilio, dignum duximus non eos separandos ab invicem, donec plenius in eis formatum Christum, donec ad integrum doceantur proeliari proelia Domini."

¹³²See Michael Casey's introductions to each parable in *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Parables & Sentences, Parables*, trans. and introduced by Michael Casey, *Sentences* trans. by Francis R. Swietek, introduced by John R. Sommerfeldt, ed. Maureen M. O'Brien (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), esp. 11–12. See also Mette B. Bruun, *Parables: Bernard of Clairvaux's Mapping of Spiritual Topography* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 139.

In the parables, to mature was to join the battle. Bernard employs familiar language that he often associates with childhood. As new recruits progress from “stupid and foolish” beginners to prophetic, learned, and perfected monks, they learn to fight.¹³³ In the parable, the themes of each stage in this progression mirror that of *De diversis affectionibus*. With the opening of the parable we find a boy, a stand-in for the human condition more generally, in the Garden of Eden. God grants the “delicate boy” the *paedagogos* of the Law and Prophets along with other tutors and advocates who were to guide him until “the prescribed time of his consummation,” presumably with the bridegroom, Jesus.¹³⁴ The boy, however, desires new experiences. He falls into disobedience and finds himself, like the Prodigal Son, wandering in sin. Bernard describes him in worldly, feminine terms, as foolish, curious, licentious, as well as subject to luxuriousness, fleshly pleasures, and worldly cares.¹³⁵

When the “wanton boy (*lascivum puerum*)” finds himself in despair among the pigs, God sends the virtues on a rescue mission.¹³⁶ The remainder of the parable narrates the rescue in which virtues liberate the boy from the prison of his flesh, mount him on a horse named Desire and then fight their way back to a walled city ruled by Lady Wisdom. This city resembles the monastery. Even after his entrance into the city, however, the revengeful vices besiege and quickly overwhelm it. Only at the last second does God send Charity and the battle is won.

Much like *De diversis affectionibus*, this parable presents the novice as a boy who requires the care reserved for children. For example, he is first urged on by the beatings of the virtue, Fear. In *De diversis affectionibus*, Bernard explains that these blows were bitter interior thoughts, which are “the rods by which God spans his little children.”¹³⁷ Likewise, in the parable, Hope comforts the boy by wiping his eyes and face, just as the pedagogue from *De diversis affectionibus*.¹³⁸ In the end, however, the boy must join the virtues in the battle against the vices.

When new recruits left the world for Cistercian monasteries they became “children” and began a journey of spiritual formation through which they became masculine monks. The Cistercian presentation of childhood and youthfulness as unformed, feminine, prone to extremes, and vulnerable to the enticements of the world, shaped both Cistercian conceptions of spiritual progression and also of monastic masculinity. These new adult “children” drew on their experiences as they progressed through the monastic ranks by ascetic warfare against the vices. It was through their strict life that Cistercians made men, or so they claimed. While scholars have noted the martial and masculine rhetoric of the Cistercians alongside their nuptial and maternal imagery, scholars have mostly overlooked the gendered implications of the imagined “child.” Childhood, however, is essential for understanding the power behind the images of the “abbot as mother,” the marriage bed, and training for battle. The child formed

¹³³Bernard uses perfect passive participles to stress development over time, including the need for continued development in becoming a completed, perfect monk. *De filio regis*, SBO 6–2, 266–267.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 261: “Rex dives et potens, Deus omnipotens, filium sibi fecit hominem, quem creaverat, cui sicut puero delicato paedagogos delegavit Legem et Prophetas, ceterosque tutores et actores usque ad praefinitum tempus eius consummationis.”

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 261–262.

¹³⁷*Sermo* 8, SBO 6–1, 115: “Haec sunt enim verbera, quibus castigat parvulos suos Deus. . .” This translation is my adaptation of that found in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Monastic Sermons*, trans. Daniel Griggs, intro. Michael Casey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 54.

¹³⁸*De filio regis*, SBO 6–2, 262.

the basis through which the rest of Cistercian gendered language gained meaning. Without an unformed and unruly child, there could be no mature, masculine monk. Likewise, without a delicate child to nurture, there could be no motherly abbot.

IV. Conclusion

For Cistercians childhood, as a metaphor, informed a variety of gendered identities. In their impulsiveness, unruliness, and unformed nature, children represented the non-masculine, like women and beasts. In their innocence they could be symbols of ideal humility while at the same time Cistercians might wield the image to denigrate an opponent by showing they were bested by someone inexperienced. The child also gave important context and meaning to notions of monastic motherhood and fatherhood. Without the imagined “child,” there is no motherly abbot. The imagined “child” was an essential element in Cistercian gender that both informed their interpretation of ascetic practice and gave meaning to their masculine, nuptial, and maternal imagery. Not only did the Cistercians utilize the image of the “child” as a way to construct the gendered adult monk, but their conceptions of childhood also formed an essential link in their understanding of conversion and monastic maturation. Furthermore, the metaphor of childhood shaped relationships within the monastery between mature and authoritative monks and those who were new recruits, less experienced, or less disciplined, just as the Cistercians also deployed the language of maturity and immaturity to undermine their monastic rivals. In all of this, “youth” and “childhood” are an unrealized but essential element in Cistercian gendered rhetoric. The “child” shaped notions of effective ascetic practice, informed concepts of humility, and organized monastic space while explaining the differences between the world and the monastery.

Perhaps where childhood became the most powerful and unifying part of Cistercian gendered imagery was in the realm of spiritual progression. For the Cistercians, a new recruit ideally grew from a monastic “child” to a mature, masculine monk worthy of the bedchamber of the bridegroom. The Cistercians presented themselves as a monastic order that took effeminate, worldly, childish recruits and made them into manly monks. This was accomplished as the new “child” monk learned to control their body as they progressively renounced their worldliness through the battle of ascetic practice. Not only Bernard but also writers such as Aelred of Rievaulx and William of St.-Thierry used the figure of the child at key points in their arguments to express the trajectory of embodied monastic progression. Similarly, Bernard included “childishness” as a marker of feminine worldliness in opposition to masculine monastic battle. Much like in his letter to Fulk, Bernard urges the childish Robert to “Get up, gird your loins, put aside leisure, show yourself a man, and do some hard work.”¹³⁹ If Robert would only leave leisure for labor and train his body, the difficulties of Cistercian austerity would fade.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Bernard reminds Robert, the “foolish boy” and “delicate knight,” that “with the enemy approaching and arrows flying around, a shield will not seem burdensome, a hauberk and helmet are not felt.”¹⁴¹ In developing this

¹³⁹*Epistola 1*, SBO 7, 9–10: “Surgere, praecingere, tolle otium, exsere vires, move brachia, complosas explica manus, exercitare in aliquo. . .”

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*: “Adversarius instans et circumvolantia spicula facient clipeum non esse oneri, lorica non sentiri vel galeam.”

discourse in the context of competition and conflict over proper monastic practice, Cistercian monks used their notions of masculinity in their recruitment efforts as a way to differentiate themselves from their rivals. In other words, Cistercians deployed violent, masculinizing discourse to shape their public identity. As a part of this rhetoric, to insult someone by calling them childish was to destabilize their masculinity. On the other hand, to leave the world and become a “child” entailed a call to “Take up arms, man up, while the battle still rages.”¹⁴²

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¹⁴²*Epistola* 2, SBO 7, 22: “Sume arma, resume vires, dum adhuc proelium durat.”

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