



## QUEERING VIRGINITY

As I plotted the original version of this brief and necessarily general engagement with medieval virginity a year ago, it seemed that every newspaper and television news broadcast in the United States featured yet another story about sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church. The media were saturated. And with a provocative regularity, the in-depth investigations of CNN, *Newsweek*, *Time* and the like sought and found a cause for the abuse in the Church's doctrine of clerical celibacy, a concept which they then attempted to historicize as a product, a relic of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> In requiring celibacy of its clergy and religious, such reports routinely suggested, the Church was backward—more specifically 'medieval,' in opposition to 'modern,' and thus queer, in ways discussed by Dinshaw—unnatural.<sup>2</sup>

Unnatural, queer, apparently, in many ways: articles and editorials frequently pursued clerical celibacy into the 'related' topics of institutional secrecy and almost inevitably 'gays in the priesthood.' Tabloid news sources went further, repeating salacious urban myths of Internet chat rooms for pedophilic priests and seminary field trips to downtown gay cruising areas, and all but suggesting that access to nubile young altar boys was a 'perk' of the priesthood. In fact, if the Traditional Family Values Coalition's weekly email newsletter was to be believed, the Church's defense of clerical celibacy represented just one more item in the dreaded Homosexual Agenda for recruiting vulnerable young people into a dangerous and sinful lifestyle.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching medieval literature in such a climate proved...interesting. And enlightening. The topic lurked inescapably behind classroom discussions of just about every monastic text, every legend of a virgin martyr, and certainly every virginity tract.

As I revise this essay nearly a year later, the media frenzy over clerical celibacy has died down. But the pedagogical problem remains. Doesn't everyone know how natural sex is? And so how naturally repression must lead to trouble? Certainly it seems so to most of my students at a large, secular, public university in the United States. Even those students who eschew (or whose work schedules preclude) viewing sex-drenched (or more properly, heterosexual drenched) television offerings like *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor* (and *The Bachelorette*) or *Elimidate* can hardly escape immersion in American popular culture. To them, virginity—the chastity of the vowed virgin, the nun, monk or religious, or more extreme, that of the virgin martyr—constitutes a very strange choice indeed. At its most positive, as the only Family-Values approved form of contraception, virginity is a temporary abstinence. Chastity is a vow not for life but for the time-being, a 'just saying no' until—eventually, inevitably—heterosexual sex becomes appropriate. And, perhaps, all but

mandatory. Virginity? Celibacy? In the words of one student's slang reaction to Bede's story of Aethelthryth's adamant virginity despite not just one but two marriages, 'that's just so gay.'

Or Queer.

And if so, then perhaps queer theory may assist us not only in delineating and analyzing virginity as a category of medieval sexuality, but in interrogating our own twenty-first century engagements with it. The utility of queer methodology, I would argue, lies in its inherent practicality, as a pedagogical tool for confronting contemporary perceptions of 'medieval queerness' as invoked in our own world, as well as in its theoretical project of disrupting, destabilizing, and denaturalizing. More specifically, its discovery of the contradictions within constructs like sexuality—whether homosexuality, heterosexuality or whatever-sexuality—then and now offers us a lens through which we may read (and teach) texts that construct virginity as more than a negation or unnatural repression. Virginity becomes not a non-sexuality merely endured but rather a kind of 'whatever-sexuality' desired as better, purer, and perhaps provocatively more natural. Far from merely a 'just saying no'—though renunciation and disciplining, indeed martyrdom, of the flesh play their parts—the medieval virginity some texts disclose can be militantly active, egregiously sensuous, disruptive and transgressive.

Take, for example, the role models for the abbess and nuns of Barking offered by Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*. Violently phallic and virginally fecund, Ecclesia '[strikes] vitally into the hearts of men with the double-keen sword-edge of the Testaments, [and] fertilizes through the chaste seed of the Word the offspring who are lawful heirs of eternity.' Ecclesia's activity is procreative, and thus natural. The imagery is naturally, appropriately heteronormative. But this Ecclesia, this virgo as virago, also disruptively reverses, or at least bends, 'natural' gender. In a subsequent description of virginal 'procreation,' moreover, Aldhelm's text constructs Ecclesia's minions as much less natural, much more queer. In 'dense armies of rejoicing throngs,' they swarm like bees, 'settling on the honey-bearing petals of marsh-marigolds or the purple flowers of mallows [gathering] honeyed moisture drop by drop in their mouths,' bearing 'their fertile booty in the numerous loading of their thighs and hips, [and] pressing together the smooth flower-clusters of ivy and the tender buds of blossoming lime-tree' to construct as and for their monastic community 'the multi-dimensional edifice of the honeycomb with angular and hidden cells' (p. 63). Their sensuous fertility here is by definition communal and collective—and effectively homonormative.

Aldhelm's text is, granted, extreme in its provocative imagery. Many more instances of medieval religious rhetoric might be cited which, by invoking the image of union with the Heavenly Bridegroom, could be said to save virginity for heterosexuality. My students turn to these with evident relief. And yet even there how many virgins emulate Bede's and/or Aelfric's Aethelthryth and resist secular marriage? How many virgin martyrs, like Cynewulf's Juliana, for example, equate marriage and paganism, and champion the defiance

of paternal and imperial authority, despite gruesome and often sexual or sexualized torture? Such determined marriage resistance—an integral part of medieval virginity narratives—inherently disrupts the normativity of heterosexuality, of mundane kinship bonds and lines of inheritance. Then, too, the violence of those narratives inscribes virginity as constantly imperiled, if not by overt martyrdom then by the temptations of the flesh. And in some other legends, like those of Aelfric's transvestite saints Eugenia and Euphrosyne, for example, the virgin's body is revealed as paradoxically natural (more perfectly Christian in its essential masculinity despite its apparent femininity) in its unnaturalness.

Moreover, finally, such narratives of marriage resistance, such disruption of the normal, the natural, represent, on some level, attempts at 'recruitment.' Most stories of virgin martyrs are set in a distant, antique world, but narratives like the *Life of Christina of Markyate* suggest how potent—and, to medieval parents desirous of arranging advantageous earthly marriages for their daughters and sons, how dangerous—such urgings to marriage resistance might be. Texts like *De Virginitate*, or the later medieval *Hali Meidhad*, say, are, after all, hardly subtle. We should not forget, either, that the ever-troublesome Margery Kempe not only desired chastity for herself, but was accused of luring impressionable women into abandoning their conjugal duties as well.<sup>5</sup>

My students are right. Problematizing both 'medieval' and 'modern' sexualities and genders, the bodies of medieval virgins are queer bodies indeed.

—Lisa Weston, California State University, Fresno

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, Jason Berry's editorial, 'Secrets, Celibacy and the Church' in the *New York Times* for April 3, 2002: 'the requirement of celibacy is not dogma; it is an ecclesiastical law that was adopted in the Middle Ages because Rome was worried that clerics' children would inherit church property and create dynasties.' More subtly, Anna McGeary's 'Can the Church be Saved?' (*Time*, April 1, 2002) notes that 'Rome quietly published, in Latin, a papal directive known as a *motu proprio*...tucked inside a long annual record of the Holy See. It directed that allegations of sex abuse be brought secretly for judgment by Rome's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, once known as the Inquisition.'

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 183–206.

<sup>3</sup> Even the more reputable news media were not exempt. Consider Amanda Ripley, 'Inside the Church's Closet,' *Time Magazine* for May 20, 2002, and her informant's narrative of a Chicago seminary as site of 'gay subculture': 'It was a pretty wild, free-for-all place. If you went into any of the gay bars, you were bound to meet a priest or seminarian there.' The clerical closet constitutes 'a world of secrecy, shame and isolation—the very dark place where priestly dysfunction can breed.' In relation to the motif of secrecy, both personal and institutional, which such reports also medievalize, compare Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1979), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> See Kathy Lavezzo's discussion of this charge in 'Sobs and Sighs Between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,' in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 175–98.