



## A RESPONSE: QUEER MEDIEVALISM: WHY AND WHITHER?

The 'why' of my title is in one sense a question which invites a non-answer: some of us medievalists are also interested in queer theory; some queer theorists are interested in the medieval. Why do queer medievalism, why queer the Middle Ages? Because it's there; because we can. Because, under the scrutiny of the panopticon of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which grades British academics by research attainment, claiming 'queer medievalism' as an area of expertise produces a research profile which looks both cutting-edge and scholarly. And because, in non-academic contexts, it's an unbeatable conversation stopper.

These are all, in their own field of discourse, perfectly good answers, but the question can also be asked in a more strictly scholarly tone. Study of the Middle Ages still has to negotiate with the perception, held by very few medievalists but considerable numbers of non-medievalists, that the period is innocent, a time *before* individuality, subjectivity, sexuality, on which theory of any kind is a rude imposition. The founding texts of queer studies have on the whole passed over the medieval; antiquity, the Renaissance, the nineteenth century, the present day have been the privileged periods. The very term, 'queer medievalism,' is powerful because of its *frisson* of paradox, and the 'queer medievalist' individual must be resigned to a degree of hybridity. Insofar as queer theory is a theory of culture and history, however, it demands to be tested in all historical periods so that sexuality-formations may be examined in all their historical specificity. As Lee Patterson writes, theorizing and historicizing are mutually informative practices, and Stephen Morris's contribution to this debate shows the risks of insufficiently historicized enquiry.<sup>1</sup> The traditional skills of the medievalist remain necessary tools for queer critique.

Queer medievalism thus offers a fresh perception of the period to medievalists and increased historical density to queer theorists and historians. One of the great strengths of queer medievalism as it is currently practised is its diversity and genuine disagreement, which can invigorate even what Michael O'Rourke identifies in this debate as the tired question of the historicity of sexual identities: in two ground-breaking recent books, Carolyn Dinshaw finds an identifiable medieval homosexual, while Karma Lochrie argues that the period precedes the formation of heterosexuality.<sup>2</sup> To claim that the medieval is somehow inherently or fundamentally queer would be to do violence to the elusiveness and flexibility of the term and to oversimplify the period. However, the medieval offers some bodies of writing—erotic mysticism, chivalric romance, and even political theory—which not only respond well to queer

analyses, but also have the potential to redefine the terms of enquiry themselves. For example, as Lisa Weston argues in this debate, medieval virginity can destabilize binary gender and heterosexuality.<sup>3</sup>

The ambiguous position of the medieval as both the other and the origin of the modern is full of queer potential. In C.S. Lewis's outdated but still influential formulation, the period invented heterosexuality.<sup>4</sup> The claim is hyperbolic, pre-feminist and heteronormative, and almost every aspect of Lewis's argument has since been questioned. Nevertheless, the period certainly produced a large body of erotic theory and narrative, and an ironic return to Lewis has much to offer the queer medievalist. If the Middle Ages invented heterosexuality, logic suggests that it must have also invented homosexuality. Textual analysis by critics such as Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Simon Gaunt suggests that chivalric narratives of the same genre as those read by Lewis as foundational of heterosexuality in fact pay as much if not more attention to relationships between men as between men and women; they are classically homosocial.<sup>5</sup> If we accept even a temporary and strategic identification of the medieval as the origin of sexualities, then the formation of heterosexuality presents itself as an object of queer medievalist interest. The development of 'queer studies' from 'gay studies' parallels the earlier development of 'gender studies' from 'women's studies'; both are based on the desire to investigate the terms in which such categorizations are formed. Interrogation of the formation of the heteronormative is essential if 'homosexuality' is not to remain the marked term. Medievalists have the materials which enable them to take a lead in such developments.

Our materials also enable us to increase the political engagements of queer critique. Medieval political discourse thinks in terms of bodies: the bodies of the Church, the nation, estate, and monarch; bodies to which desires and desirability can be attributed; bodies such as Hildegard of Bingen's hybrid Church-Antichrist, which disrupt any unproblematic understanding of sexuality and gender.<sup>6</sup> Robert Mills's current work on Villon, appropriating Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer*, parallels the excess of the state with the excess of the individual so central to Butlerian queer theory.<sup>7</sup> Such focus on the failures of identity enables queer medievalism to join forces with the (mutantly?) growing body of medieval monstrosity studies, an alliance which could well parallel that suggested by Noreen Giffney in this debate of queer and post-colonial medievalisms. Medieval studies is well-placed to take advantage of the widening of the scope of queer theory, and to test the limits of its use.

To conclude, I will outline an aspect of my own current work which speaks to these issues and to some of Michael O'Rourke's exciting range of suggestions for the next wave of queer medievalism. I did not expect sexuality to be a major theme when I began writing on paganism in *Mandeville's Travels*, but that was before I had opened BL MS Harley 3954, the illustrations of which show a remarkable number of remarkably detailed male nudes which the text itself does not require. The contexts in which they appear suggest that these

are wildman figures, who represent the sexuality which elite men such as the purported narrator must disavow; but the illustrator nevertheless clearly takes pleasure in contemplating them. It would be possible to align this pleasure to the text's unease with heterosexuality, in, for example, the representation of active female desire in the form of a hideous dragon, but to use the combination to 'out' Mandeville or his illustrator would be too closed an argument. Sexuality, gender, ethnicity, culture, and species interact in complex ways in this text and its illustrations; the monstrous nudes require an analysis in which all these categories can be queered.

—Sarah Salih, *University of East Anglia*

<sup>1</sup> Lee Patterson, 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History and Medieval Studies,' *Speculum* 65 (1990): 87–108, esp. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 195; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> An assessment confirmed by my own work, especially 'Queering *Sponsalia Christi*: Virginité, Gender and Desire in the Early Middle English Anchoritic Texts', in *New Medieval Literatures 5*, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 155–76; and Anke Bernau, 'Virginal Effects: Text and Identity in *Ancrene Wisse*' in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 36–48; Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginité and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, repr. 1985), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, 'Malory's Body Chivalric,' *Arthuriana* 6 (1996): 52–71; Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 75–85.

<sup>6</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 493.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Mills, 'Homo Sacer: Villon and Suffering', paper given at University of East Anglia Interdisciplinary Medieval Seminar, (February 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Recent scholarship on medieval monstrosity includes: *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, forthcoming); Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (London: Reaktion, 1998), pp. 232–75; *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: 1999); *Marvels, Miracles and Monsters: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002); *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetites in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002); David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).