

Simon Gaunt and Carolyn Dinshaw, reflecting on the nature of compulsory heterosexuality in the Middle Ages, suggest that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of a spectrum of possible sexualities can be very helpful. Sedgwick asserts that a variety of culturally-constructed possibilities for sexual definition arises within each social context, on a spectrum with, and often in opposition to, dominant norms of official heterosexuality. I agree that this is a useful perspective, one which takes us out of the trap of the false dichotomy of essentialism and social construction.

From this perspective, we can only find "medieval lesbians" among the landmarks of medieval culture, on that particular continuum, not ours. This portrait in a landscape will have to consider uniquely medieval, and sometimes idiosyncratic, social constructions: constructions of male and female, marriage and the religious life, roles, definitions, and hierarchy. It will also need to come to terms with the fact that there is very little extant evidence for the type of relationship between women that we are looking for. We will, indeed, have to learn to read the blanks. It will have to bear in mind the fact that the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of medieval culture significantly modified the evidence for, or even the experience of, women whose primary emotional and erotic relation was to other women. But this research will doubtless be driven by our twentieth-century perspectives on gender and sexuality, and by our own idiosyncratic categories of historical inquiry: gay, lesbian, heterosexual, feminist. This is obvious and needs no apology. Otherwise, why would we bother to do it?

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FORUM: GAY AND LESBIAN CONCERNS IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES



GAY STUDIES AND FEMINISM: A MEDIEVALIST'S PERSPECTIVE



THE ESTABLISHMENT of a Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and the success of the MFN show that feminism is now a theoretical flag flown by large numbers of medievalists. Feminism is an approach many of us believe is not simply enriching, but essential to a proper understanding of medieval society and its cultural artifacts. Feminists have had to fight to establish a corner in the discipline, and if this corner has been conceded reluctantly, feminism is nonetheless now accepted as a significant feature on the map of our field: witness the number of sessions at Kalamazoo the MFN is now allocated. Gay theory, on the other hand, has had virtually no impact on medieval studies: witness the fact that none of the "Gay Studies" sessions proposed for Kalamazoo 1992 were accepted. What does this show? First, that the academy (as represented by the Medieval Institute at least) has yet to see the relevance of gay studies to medievalists; second, perhaps, that it is still acceptable in some quarters to marginalize gays. Why should gay studies apparently be so marginal to our discipline? Have gay studies—so dynamic in many areas—nothing to offer research on the Middle Ages? Is the position of gay medievalists as gays relevant to their research or were there no gay people in the

Middle Ages? What would constitute a gay perspective within medieval studies and what, if anything, would be its relation to feminist scholarship?

The homophobia of many educational institutions and the lack of visibly gay scholars in medieval studies, phenomena which are clearly not unrelated, go some way towards explaining the marginal position of gay studies within our field. Yet there are other reasons why gay-affirmative scholarship within medieval studies poses problems. For instance, research on medieval gay people can only with difficulty be grounded experientially, as much feminist scholarship on women has been. The vigorous role feminism plays within medieval studies owes much to the belief amongst large numbers of medievalists (almost all women) in the early days of feminist scholarship that the experience of women as scholars, writers, and objects of study had been consistently disregarded, that there was a concomitant misunderstanding and misrepresentation of medieval femininity and masculinity, and that modern patriarchal views had been allowed uncritically to overlay medieval patriarchy. It was consequently argued that our vision of the Middle Ages needed to be reviewed. As feminist scholarship on medieval culture has progressed, we have become more alert to the differences between medieval and modern women and men, to the pitfalls of essentializing womanhood and manhood. The scope of our inquiries has broadened and feminist theory has become more sophisticated, but the basic process of identification between the feminist scholar and her or his medieval sister still motivates much of our work. Yet, however different from modern women, however repressed, mistreated, and misrepresented medieval women as a group were, they are clearly and prominently visible within systems of representation. If most of the evidence we use to reconstruct the experience of women in the Middle Ages needs careful interpretation since it was produced by men and therefore likely to partake of a discourse of oppression, there is nonetheless no shortage of material. The same cannot be said of gay people, and one of the prime difficulties in conducting research on the experience of gay people in the Middle Ages is simply lack of data. With whose experience do we identify?

We have little evidence to reconstruct the experience of medieval gay people. There is some fine scholarship on the experience of men with a same-sex sexual orientation—I think principally of John Boswell's trail-blazing and inspiring work—but the fact remains that images of gay people in medieval texts and artifacts are few and far between. Usually they emanate from very exclusive, clerical circles (as is the case with much of Boswell's apparently gay-affirmative material) or they are found in virulently homophobic contexts, also often clerical. Moreover, there are virtually no images (visual or literary) of lesbians from the period. Boswell's work can give the impression of a vibrant and widespread gay subculture in the Middle Ages, yet the size of the body of texts and images he studies compared to the amount of heterosexual erotically motivated texts and images is infinitely small. I draw no conclusions from this about the frequency of same-sex sexual encounters, I merely note that within medieval systems of representation, gay sexuality is virtually invisible.

Boswell's devotion of a book to the experience of "gay people" in the Middle Ages raises a further important problem of which he himself is acutely aware. If notions of "gay" or "the homosexual" are constructed within historically specific social practices, is it legitimate to talk about "gays" or "homosexuals" in the Middle Ages at all, since both terms are modern inventions? Did it even occur to the medieval mind to classify people according to their sexual orientation? Boswell has been criticized for assuming the category "gay" in medieval culture. I would agree with him that it is permissible to talk

about gay people in the Middle Ages, but only inasmuch as some people (usually homophobes) clearly did believe that some men (I use the word advisedly, as little is ever said about lesbians) had an irrevocable and immanent sexual orientation towards their own sex, and that this was significant in social interaction. To go from here to assume a “gay” identity and consciousness (a position Boswell in fact meticulously avoids) may be to project modern concerns onto the past in an unhelpful manner. I am not against asking modern questions of the past. On the contrary, dialogue between present and past ensures our discipline’s dynamism. But as professional medievalists we must keep a sense of historicity, and talking about “gay” people in the Middle Ages may be highly misleading if it implies a close parallel between medieval people with a same-sex sexual orientation and modern gay people.

Furthermore, I am unhappy about using the word “gay” of people in the past, when I am not sure what it means for me in the present. In some respects I am proud to call myself gay. On the other hand, I do not identify with the lifestyle or views of many individuals and groups who call themselves gay, and I consider that there are many things about me which are more important than my sexual orientation to all but an extremely small minority of the people I encounter, both professionally and privately. The label represents a double bind: a (positive) rejection of the way in which society attempts to coerce me with regard to my sexuality, and a (negative) recognition of the fact that I cannot escape the way society privileges sexuality as a structuring device and marker. Moreover, like Judith Butler, I am uneasy that the meaning of words like “gay” is in fact often determined by a patriarchal discourse which I would like to see dismantled. If I use the word throughout this essay, the main reason is that it is less cumbersome than its alternatives. I find “gay” a problematic term.

My insistence on different types of “gay” experience—whether they be historical or amongst women and men today in different social, professional, and geographic circumstances—echoes the concern of feminists not to assume “women” and the “feminine” are unitary and ahistorical categories. Further research is needed to understand what being “gay” in the Middle Ages meant. How did people with a same-sex sexual orientation think of themselves? How did their sexual orientation affect their role in society? How can we apprehend lesbian experience in the Middle Ages and in what ways did this differ from that of gay men? Boswell’s work goes some way towards answering some of these questions, but the picture is still hazy and he tends to emphasize continuity rather than difference. Moreover, I suspect that since most medieval gay people left no trace, our questions about them may remain unanswered.

However, if the experience of gay people in the Middle Ages is clearly important, I do not believe it should be the only or even the main concern of medievalists with an interest in gay studies. My own thinking on the role of gay studies within scholarship on the Middle Ages has been influenced by non-medievalists like Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who are working in the space between gay studies and feminism. Sedgwick puts the case for what she calls a “universalizing,” as opposed to a “minoritizing” view of gay issues. A “minoritizing” view would hold that gay politics concerns only a small minority of people; a “universalizing” view would see gay sexuality as a concern of everybody inasmuch as it has a position on a spectrum of possible sexualities which are culturally constructed, often in opposition to the dominant, officially sanctioned version of heterosexuality. Gay sexuality—often only visible in the form of homophobia—would thus have an important place in a discourse of sexuality which regulates everybody’s behavior. This suggests two fruitful intersections between

gay and feminist theory. First, just as women are not the only object of study in feminist scholarship, since feminist theory allows us to foreground gender as a critical concept and therefore to study masculinity as well as femininity, so gay people need not be the only object of study for gay studies, since gay theory allows us to foreground sexuality as a cultural construction and thus make heterosexuals a legitimate object of study. Second, as the work of Rubin and Sedgwick shows, if gender and sexuality are not the same thing, they are intricately connected. Compulsory heterosexuality under patriarchy contributes to the oppression of both women and gays, so in some respects they are fighting some of the same battles.

This is not to say that the connection between gay studies and feminism, either within our discipline or more generally, is automatic and unproblematic. Speaking as a man, but as a man who developed a commitment to feminism before a commitment to gay-affirmative politics, I agree with Sedgwick that a successful alliance between the two must be the result of careful negotiation and involve a critical awareness of where the interests of women and gay men (in particular) have converged and diverged in the past, as well as where they may diverge in the future. Two points are perhaps relevant here. First, gay male subcultures can be deeply misogynistic even more exclusive of women than other male-orientated social structures: some of the medieval men Boswell studies are prime examples of misogynistic gay men. As feminists we need to be extremely careful of assuming that “gay = good.” Second, the oppressions of women and gay men may have much in common, but they are qualitatively different. The psychological violence from which women and gays suffer within patriarchy is enormous, but whereas some gay men may benefit materially from patriarchy as men, no women benefit from patriarchy as women. I am not suggesting that all gay men benefit from patriarchy: the gay victims of the Nazi holocaust, modern-day victims of gay-bashing, and the hopeless inadequacy of official responses to the AIDS epidemic are ample testimony to the contrary and to the brutal consequences of the homophobia which patriarchy produces. On the other hand, my own experience (rooted admittedly in the comfortable, middle-class existence of the intellectual in post-war England and France) is that in trivial and not-so-trivial circumstances, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways (at school, in restaurants, during job interviews) I have been treated as a man whether I liked it or not; often I am not sure I have even noticed this, so grounded is my experience in being a man. Job interviews might have been rather different had I worn a “glad-to-be-gay” badge, of course, but this demonstrates my point. Gay men may suffer enormously from the trauma of being gay in a homophobic society, but they can choose whether or not to be out; women have no such choice, as they are “outed” as women within patriarchy from birth. Gay men can profit from patriarchy as well as suffer in it and the fact that some of the figures in Boswell’s study are high-ranking church men, pillars of the patriarchal establishment, is ample testimony to this.

Yet with these caveats, the combination of gay and feminist theory opens up exciting perspectives within medieval studies. I am thinking particularly of the way in which such an alliance might lead to a new feminist and gay-affirmative interpretation of the literary and cultural phenomenon nineteenth-century scholars called “courtly love,” which perhaps lies at the root of our own culture’s privileging of sexuality as a structuring and regulatory device. I have been working on early courtly texts and am struck by the role sexuality plays in the regulation of male bonding and the position of homophobia within this discourse of sexuality. It is not just that early courtly texts impose heterosexuality—obviously they do—but that they impose a particular version of it and construct a

homophobic hetero-homosexual opposition to reinforce this. Thus the inference is that if a man does not accept a certain model of heterosexuality, he must prefer men, and not be a proper man. Homophobia of this kind supports Sedgwick's contention that if homophobia oppresses the few, it coerces all men. Women as well as men suffer the consequences of this.

Gay theory is important to feminism because it allows us to turn a critical eye on heterosexist structures which oppress women as well as gay men and lesbians. It could be objected that feminism does not need gay theory to do this, but I doubt whether this is true. After all, men were not doing too good a job of critically examining patriarchy before feminism, so why should heterosexuals—even feminists—do a better job of critically examining heterosexarchy? I do not by any means wish to imply by this that straight people cannot practice gay-affirmative scholarship, for I work with many straight colleagues who do so; similarly I believe men can practice feminist scholarship. My point is rather that just as men in the feminist movement must take the lead from women because of the importance of their perspective, so what we now need is to include a gay perspective in our critical examination of sexuality in the Middle Ages.

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THE HETEROSEXUAL SUBJECT OF CHAUCERIAN NARRATIVE



“I’M NOT SURE WHAT it has to do with Chaucer, but it’s interesting:” one response to the first session of my graduate Chaucer seminar at Berkeley, a course I’ve titled “The Heterosexual Subject of Chaucerian Narrative.” The “it” bemusedly referred to was a discussion of three essays, by John Boswell, David M. Halperin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The first two argue with each other about how to do the history of sexuality; Boswell seeks to contribute to “the history of gay people,” arguing that there was something that we would call homosexuality (among people whose erotic object choices were of the same sex and who grouped themselves together on this basis) in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Halperin, inspired by Foucault, maintains that sexuality—and thus homo- and heterosexuality—are modern inventions; gay history to him is history from the point of view of gay people today, history that carefully delineates the terms in which sexual experiences were recorded in earlier times and that measures and assesses the differences between those terms and the ones we might use today. Sedgwick meditates on several “axioms” of gay and lesbian studies today, suggesting, among a great many other things, that Foucauldian historians, such as Halperin, who seek a “Great Paradigm Shift” tend to flatten out the varieties of homosexual experience today in their search for differentiations from the past.

Our discussion focused on the differences between “essentialist” and “social-constructionist” arguments, the problems with essentialism, the advantages of essentialism, and the political need to abandon such debates. In fact, the class found a greater similarity, in terms of practical payoff, between Boswell and Halperin than either (I’m sure) would be able or willing to see himself. Further questions were raised about the political importance of the fact that this essentialism/ social constructionist debate configured solely around discussions of male-male sexual relations.

We then read essays by Judith C. Brown and Caroline Walker Bynum, each taking a diametrically opposed view on female sexuality in the late Middle Ages. Brown suggests that women were having what we would now call lesbian experiences in earlier times even if men writing the laws, penitentials, theology, and so on, didn’t know what to call them; Bynum implicitly suggests in this article (explicitly in others) that women’s experiences with other women that look to us like sexual experiences may better be seen as particularly somatic expressions of spirituality and devotion. We attempted to assess the impact of gender on the essentialist/ social constructionist question. And we tried to discern, both for the primary materials and for the secondary arguments what was at stake in either attributing or denying “lesbian” experiences to women in the Middle Ages.

Turning to Chaucer, we started with the Book of the Duchess (which, as of this date early in the semester, we haven’t finished). We shall continue with Troilus and Criseyde and most of the Canterbury Tales.

What does this lesbian/gay theory stuff have to do with Chaucer? I’m of the mind that