

9 E.g., love poems evidently written by women to women may be found in Meg Bogin, The Women Troubadours (New York, 1980), 75, 132-3, 176-7; Peter Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), vol. 2, 478-81; Peter Dronke, Women Writers of the Middle Ages (Cambridge 1984), 98; and John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (Chicago, 1980), 220-21. E. Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 2 (1986): 81-93, discusses thirteenth-century lesbian erotic poetry. A more challenging task will be to develop ways of identifying lesbian authorship of non-erotic medieval literature.

REDEFINING HOLY MAIDENHOOD: VIRGINITY AND LESBIANISM IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND



THERE IS AN AMBIGUITY in the much decried, supposedly misogynous section of Hali Meidenhad¹ that allows for markedly divergent readings, at least one of which demands the humorously critical eye of a feminist (who might mischievously assign the authorship of Hali Meidenhad to a lesbian separatist for the purpose of converting her not-so-radical sisters). That is, the undeniably male author of Hali Meidenhad unwittingly allows us to consider a redefinition of medieval female virginity as lesbianism.

Lesbianism and feminism are inextricably connected. Although there are lesbians who do not consider themselves feminists, even heterosexual feminists are increasingly aware of the political ramifications of women's intimate relationships. For example, feminists are often "threatened" with the label "lesbian" (our modern "witches") regardless of our lifestyles. As a result, there are many heterosexual women who express self-identification with lesbianism. As feminists and medievalists, we may redefine medieval writings by reading them with a touch of the same healthy sarcasm with which we view our own male-oriented culture. Although Hali Meidenhad was written by a man and not by a lesbian separatist, we should remember that it was, after all, written for women. Let us, then, take up that challenge and read it as women.

The author of Hali Meidenhad assumes from the start that all women desire to be married, to be committed sexually to a man, and to nourish him and the children resultant of their vaginal-penile intercourse. After admitting his fear of female virgins succumbing to their marriage fantasies, the author delineates in great detail the deficiencies of human marriage and then offers to female virgins the heavenly alternative of the Jesus-husband. The fallacy of this approach, however, is that the actual undesirability of marriage that the author propounds works to undermine not only women's supposed desire for a human husband but also women's presumed desire for the Jesus-husband. Although Hali Meidenhad is ostensibly a promotion of female virginity, it is in practice—in focus, if you will—a condemnation of heterosexual marriage. Examples of the juxtaposition of female virginity and heterosexuality are found not only in the works of medieval authors but also in the medieval legal recognition of male homosexuality and ignorance of female homosexuality. These juxtapositions allow for no other options—such as lesbianism—for women. Women, it is no news to us, were defined by men according to their sexual relationships with them. But in as much as virginity was considered the only alternative

to marriage (widowhood being a murky compilation of the two) it was considered from the male perspective to be the only alternative to active heterosexuality.

Of course, it has been argued that the female virgin was seen (in a much more essential way than the male virgin) through the heterosexual lens as much within her spiritual marriage to her Jesus-husband as she would have been within her physical marriage to a human husband. Margery Kempe appears to fit that description, for she knew and detested the sexual and physical rigors of her human marriage and yet desired a spiritual marriage with Jesus (which she, interestingly enough, described in explicitly physical terms).² However, her hatred of human marriage denies the grounding assumption of the author of Hali Meidenhad: that all women want to be married. Through her refutation of that assumption Kempe emphasizes the Hali Meidenhad author's self-contradiction as he plays out the fallacy while undercutting it: The Jesus-husband of medieval women is subject to the same subversion as human husbands.

Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out the heterosexuality of the medieval Mary who was a focal object for men significantly more than for women. And medieval women identified with Jesus in a notably other-than-heterosexual way, for his attractiveness was in his womanly body. He was for men, then, a heterosexual object but for women a means of self-identification through the physical experience of the female body.³ I think that this woman-identified experience of the Divine by medieval women, including on a smaller scale Margery Kempe and on a larger scale Julian of Norwich⁴ (who, not coincidentally, generally avoided heterosexual imagery), begs for further consideration in lesbian studies as we breach our own cultural taboos on religious homoeroticism.

Precisely so as not to misread women's import in medieval literature, we must begin to accept in earnest that medieval women did live truly different lives when not bound to husbands. And we must begin to consider their own senses of their virginal lives as possibly akin to lesbianism. "Holy maidenhood" provided for medieval women not only a rejection of physical heterosexuality but also a rejection of spiritual heterosexuality—in favor of women-only physical spaces and women-identified spirituality. This is a sort of lesbianism (achieved in Hali Meidenhad inadvertently with humor) with which we modern feminists can identify.

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NOTES



- 1 Hali Meidenhad: An Alliterative Homily of the Thirteenth Century, ed. Oswald Cockayne (London: Trubner, 1866), 23-38.
- 2 See pages 6-8, 11-12, 16, 21, 23-25, 52-53, 86-91, 161, and 212 in her Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Sanford Brown Meech (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940)
- 3 See pp. 140-41 in Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1982); pp. 246, 263, 267-269, 272-273 in Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987); and pp. 100, 114, 148-149 in Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion (New York: Zone, 1991).
- 4 See especially chapters 58-63 in A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich, eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978).