

¹⁵Douin de Lavesne, *Trubert*, ed. G. Raynaud de Lage, *Textes littéraires français* 210 (Paris and Geneva: Droz, 1974).

¹⁶See the *Recueil général et complet de fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, eds. Anatole de Montaigon and Gaston Raynaud, 6 volumes (Paris, 1877; rpt. Burt Franklin Research and Source Works Series, 47 [New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.]).

¹⁷On play in medieval literature, see Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982); see also Peter L. Allen, *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the "Romance of the Rose,"* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), particularly Chapter 2, and more generally, Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950; rpt. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955).

¹⁸Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 1991 International Congress of Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University and at the 1991 Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Studies Conference at Rutgers University. I would particularly like to thank Simon Gaunt for his thoughtful assistance and suggestions.



COMMENTARY



AN ART HISTORICAL RESPONSE TO "GAY STUDIES AND FEMINISM: A MEDIEVALIST'S PERSPECTIVE"¹



I. *Survey of the literature*

Art history, traditionally more conservative than other humanities disciplines, is only at the beginning stages of gay studies, and, as with feminist research, the focus has been primarily on modern art. Yet a few authors have examined art in the context of medieval homosexuality.² In 1976, Ilene Forsyth devoted an article to an early twelfth-century

capital of Ganymede from Vézelay, which, she argued, served as a warning against monks who sexually abused oblate boys.³ In 1979, the historian Andrew McCall illustrated his book *The Medieval Underworld* with two Gothic illuminations of Dante's *Inferno*, which show homosexuals in hell, but McCall did not even mention the images in his text.⁴ In 1980, the historian Boswell, in his ground-breaking study of medieval homosexuality, referred briefly to a handful of images dating from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries: miniatures of mating hyenas and weasels, a sculpted pair of acrobats, another of Christ and St. John, and the Ganymede capital from Vézelay.⁵ Boswell's lead was taken up by specialists in Italian Renaissance art,⁶ but not by historians of medieval art.⁷

Since Boswell's study, only Michael Camille has explored medieval images of homosexuality. In 1989, he discussed in passing a pair of roundels in a *Bible moralisée* dated c. 1220-30. One shows the Fall of Humanity, with Eve tempted by a female-headed serpent. Below, the moralization of this roundel is illustrated by a scene of devils inciting two couples, one male, the other female. The accompanying text makes clear⁸ that both miniatures represent sins of the mouth; Camille observes that such images served as propaganda in the Church's war against homosexual acts.⁹ In 1992, Camille briefly referred to *bas-de-page* illustrations in the Rutland Psalter that show "naked men exposing their buttocks to the phallic thrust of arrows and letters."¹⁰

II. Is there a "lack of data"?

The scarcity of gay studies of medieval art might suggest a lack of imagery, but the real problem is that such images have been ignored. Even the few that have been noted, have not been examined in depth. For example, when Camille discusses the roundel of the two homosexual couples in the *Bible moralisée*, he fails to describe the figures, their poses, or the setting. He states that the lesbians lie "in bed,"¹¹ but in fact they do not lie on a proper bed. Beds are rendered in the manuscript as solid pieces of furniture, with bedposts that raise them above the floor, but the roundel shows each couple lying on a sort of blanket thrown on the ground. The only other bedding of this type in the manuscript appears in a miniature of Boaz and Ruth sleeping in the field. Are the same-sex couples shown outdoors? Could this be a sign of their illicit activity? This sort of close observation has been lacking in discussions of images of homosexuals. In a later article, Camille wrongly identifies a couple as lesbians. In fact, one sports the short, cropped haircut typical of male figures.¹²

Many images of homosexuals in the *Bibles moralisées* remain completely unexplored. One folio shows bishops first embracing young boys, and then rejecting them as they turn to Christ. The accompanying text relates that the "prelates and bishops ... repented of their sins ... [and] Jesus redeems them and throws them out of sodomy and they throw over the boys and leave them behind."¹³ Such images support Simon Gaunt's contention that representations of homosexuals often grew out of clerical circles.¹⁴ The *Bibles moralisées* express official ecclesiastical ideology, which was particularly concerned with the sexual sins of the clergy. One illumination of homosexuals in hell consists only of clergymen, mostly monks and one bishop.¹⁵

Some images of hyenas, weasels, and Ganymede have never been published in the context of medieval homosexuality. An especially intriguing example is a bronze vessel of the early twelfth century that is engraved with two episodes of the Ganymede myth.¹⁶

In the first scene, the eagle clutches the frowning youth. In the second, a smiling Ganymede serves as cupbearer in heaven. This vessel may express the same positive ideas that Boswell demonstrated were associated with Ganymede in the twelfth century.

One neglected area of investigation is *bas-de-page* miniatures. These include such subjects as one man shooting a spear at another man's bare rear end. Other themes include "poles aimed at hindquarters," and two men "handling genitals."¹⁷ Apparently innocuous scenes, such as men playing chess, may refer to homosexual activity. The game is used to signify erotic activity with heterosexual lovers and in one *bas-de-page*, the devil seizes a figure who is playing chess with his male companion, wearing only his underpants.¹⁸

Besides the neglect of individual images, no one has studied the representation of homosexuals as a group: images of the Old Testament stories of Lot and the Levite's wife, the ancient myth of Ganymede, Dante's *Inferno*, hyenas and weasels,¹⁹ *bas-de-page* miniatures, and miniatures of embracing homosexuals that appear in the *Bibles moralisées*. Only such a broad study can produce a better understanding of how medieval society represented homosexuals. Clearly, medieval society linked these themes. For example, the text for the hyena in one *Physiologus* manuscript was illustrated with a scene of Lot barring the Sodomites.²⁰ Seen in the context of other images, the roundel of the same sex couples in the *Bible moralisée* is strikingly different. Unlike images of eagles, hyenas, and weasels, the couples are shown in human form, and unlike the sculpture of acrobats, and Christ and St. John, their sexual activity is made quite clear. The chin-chuck gesture of one of the lesbians is a common sign of erotic activity²¹ and the couples' loving glances, embracing arms, and intertwined legs leave no doubt on the matter.

III. How do gay studies and feminist ones diverge?

Clearly, gay studies and feminist ones can build on one another, but occasionally their aims conflict. To begin with, scholars who focus on the depiction of homosexuals have discussed only images of males.²² Boswell states, for example, that "several Western manuscripts pictured two hyenas — presumably both male — embracing one another."²³ Why are they both presumed to be male?

Secondly, gay studies have shown a difference in emphasis when interpreting scenes of sexual violence. Forsyth terms the subject of the Vézelay sculpture the "Rape of Ganymede," and underlies its violence and terror. Boswell, on the other hand, refers to it as the "abduction of Ganymede" and downplays Forsyth's suggestion that the capital refers to contemporary sexual abuse of boys.²⁴ Saslow, in his study of Renaissance images of Ganymede, also tends to view the theme in the classical tradition, as one in which a dominant male forces his attentions on another.²⁵ Feminist scholars have recognized in the Greco-Roman tradition of "heroic rape" the glorification of sexual violence.²⁶

This is in no way to deny the enormous contribution made by Boswell and other proponents of gay studies, who have shed light on previously unexplored areas on medieval history and culture. Their contribution will be of critical importance as feminist scholarship begins to grow.

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²I have chosen to use modern terminology. For a discussion of the medieval conception of gays, see S. Gaunt, "Gay Studies and Feminism," *MFN*, Spring 1992, 4-5.

³I. Forsyth, "The Ganymede Capital at Vézelay," *Gesta*, XV, 1976, 241-246.

⁴A. McCall, *The Medieval Underworld*, London, 1979, figs. 41-42. Figure 43 shows a little-known French illustration, probably sixteenth century, of the execution of the heretic Gilles de Rais, who was convicted of sodomy in 1440.

⁵J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago/London, 1980, figs. 7-13, 143 n. 27, 251-252.

⁶See J. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, New Haven/London, 1980 and J. Manca, "Sacred vs. Profane: Images of Sexual Vice in Renaissance Art," *Studies in Iconography*, XIII, 1989/90, 145-190. For additional literature, see Saslow, "Homosexuality in the Renaissance: Behavior, Identity, and Artistic Expression," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. by M. Duberman et al., New York, 1989, 17-38.

⁷A forthcoming issue of *Journal of Homosexuality* will include two articles on medieval art.

⁸H.W. Stork, *Bible moralisée. Codex Vindobonensis 2554 der Osterreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Transkription und Ubersetzung*, Cologne 1988, 3.

⁹M. Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, Cambridge et al., 1989, 90-2.

¹⁰M. Camille, *Images on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, Cambridge, 1992, 43, figs. 21-2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 91.

¹²M. Camille, "Gothic Signs and the Surplus: The Kiss on the Cathedral," in *Contexts: style and values in medieval art and literature*, ed. by D. Poiron and N. Regalado, New Haven, 1991, 166-7.

¹³Stork, 106. (My translation.)

¹⁴S. Gaunt, "Gay Studies and Feminism: a Medievalist's Perspective," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, XIII, Spring 1992, 4.

¹⁵McCall, *The Medieval Underworld*, 204 fig. 42.

¹⁶J. Weitmann-Fielder, *Romanische Gravierte Bronzeschalen*, Berlin, 1981, 25-7, cat. no. 3.

¹⁷L. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, Berkeley, 1966, 142 ff., figs. 539-41.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, figs. 103, 105.

¹⁹The Index of Christian Art includes images of embracing weasels and hyenas that are not reproduced by Boswell. For medieval miniatures of Ganymede, see G. Kempter, *Ganymed*, Vienna, 1980, 178-80.

²⁰Formerly Smyrna, Lib. Evang. MS B8, Physiologus - Cosmas Indicopleustes, fo. 40v; Boswell, 143 n. 27.

²¹L. Steinberg, "The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michaelangelo's *Pietàs*," in *Studies of Erotic Art*, ed. by T. Bowie and C. Christianson, London, 1970, 280ff.

²²Boswell, Saslow, and Manca, see notes 2 and 3. For images of lesbians, see notes 5 and 6.

²³Boswell, 143 n. 27.

²⁴Forsyth, 241-6; Boswell, 251-2.

²⁵See n. 6.

²⁶E. Keuls, "The Reign of the Phallus," New York, 1985; D. Wolfthal, "A *Hue and a Cry*: Medieval Rape Imagery and its Transformation," *Art Bulletin*, forthcoming.

