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RACIAL/RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL QUEERNESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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As the work of historians like Boswell, Moore, and Spreitzer strongly suggests, the medieval construction of sexuality is importantly intertwined with constructions of gender, race and religion. In "the formation of a persecuting society," the fortunes of

Jews, Muslims, "heretics," prostitutes, and "sodomites" parallel each other, and a major question for students of medieval culture should be why such different queernesses come to be so strongly associated. Here, I want to suggest how medieval anti-Semitic and homophobic discourses—directed primarily against Jewish men and male "sodomites"—constructed sexual and religious/racial others in similar ways. First, both kinds of discourse operated through an association between the (religiously or sexually) queer and the feminine, misogynistically conceived. Second, both expressed a strong revulsion at "queer bodies." And third, both linked the bodily degeneracy of the queer to *intellectual* perversion.

Central to medieval constructions of otherness is misogyny, and attacks on sexual and religious/racial "others" often operate first by means of an imputation of "unmanly," "effeminate" behavior. The "feminization" of male homosexuality is made most explicit in discursive works like the twelfth-century "Ganymede and Helen" translated by Boswell (381-89), but it also operates in a wide variety of narrative works, from the Icelandic sagas, where the suggestion of a homosexual relation—and particularly the taking of the passive role in anal sex—consistently represents an insult to masculinity (see *Gilasaga* 3-4), to the very different tradition of Marie de France's *Lanval* (lines 259-302). The famous passage from Marie (cited, for instance, by Havelock Ellis [35-36]), in which the queen, rejected by Lanval, accuses him of having "no interest in women" and of "enjoy[ing] [him]self" with "fine-looking boys," is particularly interesting for the complicated ways in which it intertwines misogyny, the hetero- and homoerotic, and the homosocial. The depiction of the queen's attempt at seduction depends on misogyny, as does Lanval's self-defense. This defense also counterposes male homosocial loyalty (Lanval's commitment to the king) and sexuality (his refusal of the queen), even as the queen's attack pits the homoerotic against the properly homosocial—"my lord made a bad mistake when he let you stay with him." Heterosexual desire leads to the queen's attempt at seduction; it also (though secretly) motivates Lanval's rejection of her approach. Lanval's (hidden) heterosexuality—the fact that he has been pledged to secrecy by his lover—is what leads the queen to accuse him of homosexuality, and in turn it is this accusation that forces Lanval rashly to reveal the existence of his beloved. Since, in the terms of the story, this revelation endangers the love affair, we here have the defense against homosexuality paradoxically and intriguingly threatening the continuation of the heterosexual affair. In any case, the queen's accusation against Lanval threatens to take away his knightly manhood, to turn him into a "base coward [and] lousy cripple."

It is perhaps not surprising—considering contemporary Western constructions of homosexuality—that the Middle Ages should code male homosexuality as effeminacy and loss of manhood. More unfamiliar, perhaps, is the "feminization" that Jewish men undergo in medieval anti-Semitic texts. This "feminization" is most strikingly presented in the widespread idea that Jewish men menstruate, expressed as early as the thirteenth century and well into the Renaissance (see Gilman 75). Connected to this idea is the construction of circumcision as a loss of manhood. In the confessions extracted from Jews in Tynrau in the late fifteenth century, Jewish blood crimes are connected in a richly suggestive way to circumcision, menstruation, and sexual desire: "Firstly, they were convinced . . . that the blood of a Christian was a good remedy for the alleviation of the wound of circumcision. Secondly, they were of the opinion that this blood, put into food,

is very efficacious for awakening mutual love. Thirdly, they had discovered, as men and women among them suffered equally from menstruation, that the blood of a Christian is a specific medicine for it, when drunk" (Trachtenberg 149). An association of circumcision with disordered and violent sexual desire is also seen in accusations against Muslims, with the forcible circumcision of "Christian boys and youths" by the Muslim Turks closely linked to the rape of "noble women and their daughters" and the "sodomizing" of "men of every age and rank—boys, adolescents, young men, old men, nobles, servants, and, what is worse and more wicked, clerics and monks, and even . . . bishops!" (spurious letter of the Greek emperor Alexius Comnenus to Robert of Flanders, translated in Boswell 367-68; also see Guibert of Nogent 693-94).

Associated with the "feminization" of both homosexual and Jewish men is the idea that both groups are possessed of debased, "unnatural" bodies. Jews were connected with a variety of physically deforming diseases, especially those involving a loss of blood (see Trachtenberg 50-52). In a work like the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, we see Jewish bodily corruption literally enacted, with the arm of the main Jewish character severed from its body and boiled until flesh and bone separate. Revulsion at Jewish bodies further expresses itself through a close association of Jews with infection, dirt, and defecation. Ordinances in several Western European cities forbade Jews, along with lepers and prostitutes, from "hand[ing] goods on display for sale—especially food" (Moore 97; also see 38-39). Disgust at Jewish bodiliness is clearly at work in the *Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer's story of Jewish violence centered in a privy.

The bodies of "sodomites"—male bodies made not just effeminate but hermaphroditic and animal-like—were also the locus of disgust and fear, as Boswell makes clear in his citation of such writers as John Chrysostom (359-63), Peter Cantor (375-78), and Peter Damian (210-13). The language of physical revulsion is particularly strong in a work like Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus*: "Alas! it is a disgrace to speak, it is a disgrace [even] to intimate so foul a disgraceful crime to [the pope's] holy ears; but if a doctor dreads the poison of plagues, who will take care to apply the remedy? If he, who should cure, is nauseated, who will lead sick breasts to a state of safety? The vice against nature so creeps as a cancer that it touches [even] the order of holy men" (161; my translation).

As we begin to see in this last example, with Damian's rhetoric making explicit a fear of contagion, homosexuality and its associated physical degeneracy were conceived of as broadly dangerous, threatening the health of the body politic. Of course, a similar danger was perceived in Jews: because of their supposedly debased bodies and unnatural loss of blood, they were thought to need replenishment from other, more perfect (Christian) bodies, and they were thought to fulfill these needs in ways that were frighteningly well-organized, involving secret meetings and international conspiracies. In 1321, in what was far from an isolated occurrence, Jews and lepers were accused of having worked in concert to poison the wells of France (Ginzburg's recent discussion of the events of 1321 is particularly interesting; see 33-62).

The idea of Jewish and queer bodily degeneracy and danger is linked also to a claim about ideas, a belief that homosexuals and Jews were not just physically but *intellectually* perverted, and in particular unable to read and interpret texts properly. Jews, of course, were thought willfully to misunderstand the truth of Christ's life, and of Scripture both

“Old” and “New”: just as they possess debased bodies, their readings debase texts by focusing only on the material, never the spiritual (see Hermann of Cologne, and my discussion of Hermann, 154-65). Similar intellectual problems are identified with sexual queerness. Heresy was, as Spreitzer has most recently argued, consistently associated with homosexual activity, and, more broadly, sexual activity was often conceived in grammatical terms, with illicit sexuality coded as bad grammar and hence a challenge to meaningful signification. Alain de Lille expresses this most powerfully in his attack on non-procreative sexuality in *The Plaint of Nature*; here, all three homophobic terms—feminization, disgust at queer bodies, and queerness as intellectual perversion—come together.

What was at stake in defining both the sexually queer “sodomite” and the religiously and racially queer Jew as effeminate, possessing debased bodies threatening to others, and as debasing the meaning of texts through misreadings and distortions? Given Christianity’s traditional self-identification with the persecuted (embodied most strikingly in the crucified Christ), the position of the Church in the late Middle Ages—its situation as an enormously powerful institution—presented it with real problems of self-definition. How to maintain power while still claiming an identification with Christ the victim? One way was to consolidate the “enemies” of the Church—Jews and “sodomites,” “heretics” and “Saracens”—as one immense bodily and intellectual threat. Such a massive threat on the one hand helped justify the Church’s position as world power; at the same time, it recast the Church in the traditional role of “imitator Christi,” beset by enemies intent on its destruction. Even as it intensified its persecution of Jews, gay men, lepers and others, late-medieval European society, and particularly the Church, could thus deny its own power and claim the moral high-ground of the persecuted.

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REFLECTIONS ON CHAUCER'S "THE PRIORESS'S TALE"

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All through this brief historical survey, I will use the term "anti-Jewish" instead of the more common "anti-Semitic." The distinction between the two terms is important, since "anti-Semitic" is a 19th century term which shifted the focus of the entire Jewish question from religion to race. It would therefore be inappropriate to accuse Chaucer of anti-Semitism. Being a Christian, he expressed the sentiments of the Christian community in which he lived, and he did so with the rhetorical and poetic skills which make of the *Canterbury Tales* one of the most celebrated texts of English literature. But precisely because Chaucer's masterpiece is so widely read, it seems necessary to put "The Prioress's Tale" in historical perspective. This is a text which raises the question of religious prejudice, and that question should not be glossed over as irrelevant to the "literary" value of the text.

When reading "The Prioress's Tale" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* for that matter, one cannot help but be struck by the force of anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by their respective authors. One wonders to what extent their hatred against the Jews was a personal conviction, or an injunction on the part of the patrons they were obliged to please, or the manifestation of a collective imagination that for centuries had cast every Jew into the role of the villain. It may then be useful to put the presence of the Jews on British soil in historical perspective, albeit very succinctly.

Jewish settlers first come to England at the time of William the Conqueror, possibly attracted by business opportunities. Money was badly needed to finance the local economy, and the Jews were willing to take the risk of lending it at interest. By the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th, Christian money lenders, English and Italian in particular, had entered the lending business and did not look favorably upon the