

“lesbian” means. I explained Adrienne Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” (*Signs* 1980) as well as the responses and critiques of this notion offered by Anne Ferguson et al. (*Signs* 1981). We discussed the question of whether or not medieval culture offered a woman the possibility of making a conscious choice about sexual orientation, which would then form a basis for her sense of identity; whether or not medieval society would have allowed for the formation of a lesbian subculture in any sense of the word; and what we might look for in the literary and historical record in order to answer these questions. The students readily accepted the idea that “lesbianism” can cover a fairly wide range of sexual and emotional possibilities. At first, they resisted the idea that the categories of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality,” as bases for personal identity, might not have existed in medieval culture. Eventually, however, they began to accept that such categories are, at least to a certain extent, culturally constructed.

In examining the materials, various ideas emerged which allowed for fruitful discussion. Some students wondered whether relationships between nuns could be considered “lesbian” when the women were explicitly married to a masculine God and committed to an ideology that oppressed women. Others, however, argued that entering a convent enabled a medieval woman to avoid marriage and to spend her life in a community of women; as such, it might have attracted women who, in the context of modern society, would identify as lesbian. Most felt that one might fruitfully look to the Beguine movement in a search for woman-identified women, and several students took this idea up in their papers, using the writings of Hadewijch (available in English translation). The class also considered the possibility that since concepts of sexuality were overwhelmingly phallogentric, romantic and erotic relations between women may simply not have been categorized as “sex,” but rather as friendship. Moreover, even non-erotic friendship might have allowed for some degree of physical intimacy as well as considerable emotional intensity. In addressing this last question, we drew on Angelica Reiger’s article, “Was Biers de Romans Lesbian? Women’s Relation with Each Other in the World of the Troubadours,” in W. Paden, ed. *The Voice of the Troubadour*, 73-94.

I cannot claim that any conclusive answers emerged from our discussions, but the experience was rewarding for both me and the students. Aside from the obvious importance and interest in attempting to construct a lesbian herstory, the class was introduced to methodological and conceptual problems inherent in the study of other cultures and other times. From this initial experience I feel encouraged to pursue the questions raised in my own research, and look forward to future opportunities to explore them in the classroom.

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CHAUCER’S LESBIANS: DRAWING BLANKS?



CHAUCER’S PARSON openly refers to male and female homosexuality, justifying his candor with Scriptural precedent.¹ More typically, however, Chaucer veils his indication of homo- or bisexuality. The Pardoner’s eunuchry, the Summoner’s “stif burdoun,” Absolon’s unintended revenge upon Nicholas, for instance, suggest but do not name their

characters' sexual inclination. Chaucer's indirection highlights a central problem that the emerging field of gay and lesbian literary scholarship must confront, particularly as we turn our attention to earlier writers: when an author refuses or fails to specify sexual orientation, how should readers and critics respond?

On the one hand, Donald R. Howard cautions against striving for certainty on subjects about which Chaucer meant to remain enigmatic or ambiguous.² Howard's caveat merits consideration; otherwise, we risk reducing gay and lesbian studies to "outings," and richly-nuanced texts (and characters) to simplistic readings. But, as Monica E. McAlpine argues, appreciating and respecting sophisticated literary art need not conflict with trying to understand as fully as possible the sexual dynamics of characters or texts.³ Indeed, knowledge of the latter ought to enhance the former, as I believe McAlpine's exploration of the Pardoner's homosexuality—and how it matters—does.

With this goal of enhancement in mind, I wish to ask whether, outside of the Parson's Tale, any female homosexuals inhabit Chaucer's texts. This question presupposes more fundamental ones: who was the lesbian to Chaucer?⁴ How would he have understood or represented her sexuality? Most readers, I suspect, draw blanks on these questions, for Chaucer's few excursions into the depiction of female sexuality center on such evidently heterosexual women as Criseyde and the Wife of Bath. Yet I suggest that this apparent lacuna in Chaucer's texts, this gap or lack in his depiction of human sexuality, mirrored in the "blanks" readers draw, in fact lies at the heart of his representation of the lesbian and is fundamental to the medieval understanding of her.

Space allows but one case in point here concerning the early view of lesbianism as a paradigm of absence and lack. One of the few extant medieval medical discussions of female homosexuality, by William of Saliceto in 1285,⁵ characterizes the lesbian as a figure of anatomical excess: some women, William explains, experience a growth called ragadia, which begins in the uterus and can protrude beyond the vagina in the form of a penis. Thus, William concludes, woman may take man's place in sexual intercourse with another woman. While William's anatomy of a lesbian clearly endows her with more organs than the heterosexual woman, what motivates his explanation is the perception of deficiency or lack in same-sex female relationships. To put it in contemporary words, lesbian sexuality is seen as the "double lack,"⁶ and William resolves this conundrum by making less more, by providing the deficient lesbian what she requires, a penis.⁷

Chaucer, I suggest, employs a different version of this paradoxical medical paradigm of lesbianism: he represents his female homosexuals as lacking something anatomically obvious while providing them with the metaphorical phallus, or something more than conventional female power or privilege. Emily of the Knight's Tale is the most obvious example, for, as an Amazon, she literally lacks a breast. This anatomical deficiency is mirrored in her stunning lack of interest in male erotic attention: she fails to notice Palamon and Arcite's seven-year dotting upon her. At the same time, Chaucer makes less more, in the sense that Emily has not only been a warrior but, also like a man, she wishes to control her own sexuality. Not surprisingly, Chaucer has her request the lack of sexual involvement altogether.

A more exaggerated example of the deficiency paradigm is the Second Nun, the only pilgrim at the Tabard Inn who lacks a physical description in the General Prologue. Less embodied than any of her female colleagues, the Second Nun energetically creates a female hero, Cecilia, who is metaphorically more endowed than woman, for she engages in the traditionally masculine activities of teaching, preaching, and (like Emily) she desires to control her own sexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality, to be sure, lays its

claims on both Emily and the Second Nun's Cecilia in that the former is coerced into marrying Palamon and the latter goes to join her heavenly (male) spouse. Yet these heterosexualized plot resolutions prove the less-is-more paradigm by uniting the lesbian with what they think she has successfully striven to be—a man.⁸

Other models of lesbian sexuality exist in the Middle Ages and deserve investigation, and I have, of course, touched only briefly upon how the perception of lesbianism as absence, lack, or deficiency might manifest itself in literary characterization. Space prevents my exploration of how the deficiency paradigm might encode itself in narrative patterns, for instance, in the familiar medieval tale of the excessively passive woman who nevertheless motivates all the action in the plot. Perhaps more importantly, we need to consider how medieval lesbian writers (drawing more blanks?) represent their own sexuality as well as the world around them.⁹ For now, though, I have chosen to focus on the single idea that when Chaucer portrayed female homosexuals he drew "blanks" because I think one of the first tasks of gay and lesbian studies is to reread these blanks, to consider what's missing in Chaucer and other writers—and why—as well as what's absent in literary scholarship.

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- 1 E.g., Rom. 1: 26-7. Parson's Tale, ll. 909-10, cited by Vern L. Bullough, "The Sin Against Nature and Homosexuality," in Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo, New York, 1982), 70.
- 2 The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley, 1976), 342-45.
- 3 "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters," PMLA 95 (1980): 8-22.
- 4 Judith C. Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, 1989), 73-74, reminds us that the word "lesbian" was not commonly used until the nineteenth century.
- 5 Summa Conservationis et Curationis (Venice, 1498), f. l 2. Helen Rodnite Lemay discusses William's treatment of lesbianism in "William of Saliceto on Human Sexuality," Viator 12 (1981): 178-80, and in "Human Sexuality in Twelfth- through Fifteenth-Century Scientific Writings," in Bullough and Brundage, Sexual Practices, 194-96, noting that William considered ragadia a uterine disease or disorder to be cured by surgery or cauterization. Typically, Lemay remarks, medieval medical writers altogether fail to mention lesbianism, or, as I would argue here, draw blanks.
- 6 Judith Roof, "The Match in the Crocus: Representations of Lesbian Sexuality," in Discontented Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis, ed. Marlene Barr and Richard Feldstein (Chicago, 1989), 100-02, uses this phrase in her discussion of Lacan and the crisis in "a phallogocentric system of representation" lesbian sexuality provokes.
- 7 Cf. Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York, 1981), 33-34: "later...popular English notions regarding lesbian sexual possibilities (or impossibilities) appear to retain a phallogocentric bias: Without a proper tool the job cannot be done."
- 8 Cf. Marilyn R. Farwell, "Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space," in Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York, 1990), 91-103.

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