
**REDEFINING HOLY MAIDENHOOD: VIRGINITY AND LESBIANISM IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND**

There is an ambiguity in the much decried, supposedly misogynous section of *Hali Meidenhad* 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). 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. 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 Norwich* (who, not coincidently, 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
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
4 See especially chapters 58-63 in A Book of Showings to the Anchorress Julian of Norwich,
eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of