

ROUNDTABLE: QUEER METHODOLOGIES AND/OR QUEERS IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

A roundtable discussion with this title took place at the International Congress of the European Middle Ages, University of Leeds, UK, in July 2002. Michael O'Rourke (University College Dublin) was the organizer and moderator and the speakers were Noreen Giffney (University College Dublin), Mary McAuliffe (The University of Dublin, Trinity College), Stephen Morris (Independent Scholar, New York, USA), Klaus Van Eickels (Universität Bamberg, Germany), Lisa Weston (California State University, Fresno). Reflections by O'Rourke (introductory), Giffney, Weston, Morris, and a response from Sarah Salih (University of East Anglia) are included here.



BECOMING (QUEER) MEDIEVAL

Queer Methodologies in Medieval Studies: Where are we now?

According to some commentators we are now embarking upon the second wave of queer studies (it's now even possible to talk about old school queer theory)¹ and it seems a timely and important opportunity (two years after the publication of Burger and Kruger's *Queering the Middle Ages*)² to interrogate the meeting-place(s) between queer theory and Medieval Studies. The two have not always been happy bedfellows. The synthesizing of two radically opposed disciplines, one marked by (seemingly) staunch traditionalism, the other by anti-normativizing discourses, is bound to be ungainly. Yet the coming together of queer studies and Medieval Studies has often been as productive as it has been hostile. Scholars working in Medieval Studies (at least those in the field of the history of sexuality) have come to embrace the queer in all its strangeness as its 'enemy-friend.'³ Yet while they have become best enemies some medievalists still hold that queer theory with its post-modern turn is not the ideal tool for doing (in David Halperin's formulation⁴) the history of same/sex desire in the periods before 1870 and *pace* Foucault the so-called birth of the modern homosexual. Some question its usefulness as a critical optic on these Foucauldian grounds without bothering to read late Foucault where his stance on the medieval becomes most unFoucauldian. Others still cling to identitarian discourses rather than stretching queer theory beyond the writing and historicizing of same/sex desires to examine all sorts of non- (hetero-) normative acts, desires, propensities and identities in the period which falls under our view. The root of the problem (which may not necessarily be one at all) is the lack of critical consensus around the term *queer*. Not everyone who works under the sign of queer means the same thing

and the term has been used in many different ways: theoretical, political, and social. The term was always meant to be a provisional one in order to keep a sharp political and theoretical edge. Yet this very Butlerian provisionality has led some to bruit Queer Theory's demise (at worst) or its respectabilization (read normalization), at best. Either way the 'sad finish' Butler herself predicted in 'Against Proper Objects'⁶ has for some been borne out by queer theory's increasing domestication and celebrityization (at least on American campuses). Despite these arguments (and resisting the temptation to attach the prefix post-) I think queer can only grow (for want of a better word) queerer and must always be urgently located in performative temporalities, in future present tense(s). Only by continuing to 'do' queer Medieval Studies can we provide a meaningful future for queer interventions into the past. I want to speculate in the remainder of this short article on (some) possible futures for the queer past.⁷

Queer Methodologies in Medieval Studies: Where are we going?

Within the broader field of queer studies the premodern period has tended to be otherized and this ghettoization (sometimes entirely our own fault) has meant that there's still quite a lot to be done. Despite all the exciting work of the last decade queer Medieval Studies tends to be culturally myopic,⁸ to ignore the con- and di-vergences between male and female queer desires,⁹ and has proved reluctant to deploy queer methodologies without having queer objects as their focus. This has meant that we (and I am a modern literary critic and an unintentionally Anglo-centric one at that) have always seemed to focus on very obvious (read canonical) texts and sources. We have really only barely scratched the surface which leaves a rich mine for queer medievalists to tap. Here are some potential avenues for exploration:

- Future queer work need not be subsumed under the rubrics of gender and sexuality at all and might be braided with other lines of enquiry such as disability studies, postcolonial studies, Critical Race theory or black queer studies. There is much to be learnt and to be gained from this kind of intersectional thinking¹⁰ (see Giffney on the Mongols, this volume).
- Recent work in later periods has looked at homoaffectional or homoemotional bonds between men (and to a lesser extent women). The late Alan Bray's work on same/sex unions and the blessing of friendships should considerably alter the exploratory maps drawn for the history of (homo) sexuality twenty years ago.¹¹ While it might be premature to dismiss John Boswell, new evidence from Europe and from Eastern/Slavic traditions (Morris this volume) should certainly tell a different story about the contours of homorelationality.¹²
- In the last few years Renaissance scholars, Theodora Jankowski and Mary Bly in particular, have demonstrated how adult virgin women occupy a queer space in the early modern sex/gender system.¹³ Medieval scholars who ask about sexuality or sensuality without actual or literal sex, about desire(s) and sexualities not confined by digital, yes-or-no, literalized, or physicalized dichotomies (Weston this volume) can begin to think about how medieval

women (and men) militantly resist heteronormativity. Sexuality without sex in homosocial monastic milieus ought to be examined as a contributing factor in the construction of those communities.¹⁴

- Allen Frantzen's *Before the Closet* has become an important document for many reasons, but not least because it offers us the beginnings of a history of the emotions in the Middle Ages.¹⁵ We might designate this sub-field as the history of emotionology and the search for a body of texts, which might help to construct such a history, has yet to be contemplated.
- Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has initiated the discussion of what he calls 'inhuman circuits' of desire, that is, trajectories of desire between the human/non-human and human/inanimate objects.¹⁶ His work on men/horses should alert us to look for affective circuits between women/horses, what Elspeth Probyn calls 'becoming-horse,'¹⁷ not to mention men and women and their dogs. This attention to hybrid, or what Susan McHugh, after Deleuze and Guattari, calls 'pack' sexualities,¹⁸ might be assisted by Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, which thus far has not been applied to the premodern period, as if it had no historical translatability.
- There has been a recent upsurge of interest in queering Christ's body in everything from Renaissance metaphysical poetry to R.E.M. but, with the exception of Kathy Lavezzo, Bob Mills, and Garrett Epp (who quite rightly highlights the usefulness of film theory for medieval texts, drama in particular) few have considered the queerness of Christ's liquescent, orificial body and the homodevotion it inspires in medieval men and women,¹⁹ not to mention the body of antichrist 'spilling over with desire, sexual and otherwise,'²⁰ or the bodies of other monstrous races and barbarous tribes. While the last ten years of feminist and queer theories which have focused on the 'body' may be useful here, beginning to 'think through the skin'²¹ might take our postcolonially queer and queerly postcolonial theories in exciting new directions.
- Many texts have been neglected in our search for queer origins. *Ancrene Wisse*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, some *Saints Lives*, and several Old Norse sagas and (to name only a few potentials without considering French, Spanish and other European and non-European canonical and non-canonical works) are all crying out for sustained queer readings. Maybe we need to pause and ask what texts permit queer interpretations and what criteria we use to assess or dismiss their queerability. Or do we? Indeed, why should we?

Becoming-Derrida, Becoming-Deleuze, and other Q-Rated Futures

Part of the problem with queer Medieval Studies is its Foucault-fixation. Almost every article begins with either a valorization or critique of his acts-to-identities model and this debate has become as tired and stale as the essentialist/constructivist impasse. Foucauldian analyses of sexuality have almost colonized queer Medieval Studies with *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* as a talismanic text.²² Before he died Alan Bray boldly predicted that the

next twenty years of queer studies will be dominated not by Foucault but by Derrida and his *The Politics of Friendship*.²³ His work on the ethics of friendship will prove indispensable for what is one of the most important future developments for queer Medieval Studies: the return of affect.²⁴ We urgently need a history of love, friendship and intimacy between men and between women in the Middle Ages. It may not (yet) be time to *oublie* Foucault but it is time to *repenser* Derrida and our focus on the genitalic in excess of love in our histories of sexuality.

Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* has paved the way for the second most important development: the writing of tactile history.²⁵ She produces a haptic, tangible history where the postmodern and medieval touch, where past and present embrace. This new schema queers the binarized logic of then and now and skews the sequential logic of pre- and post-, cause and effect. By splicing the medieval and the postmodern Dinshaw and others bring them into radical and pleasurable contiguity.²⁶ In place of the tree-like structures of (hetero)normative temporalities Burger suggests Deleuzoguattarian rhizomatics.²⁷ It is in this recognition of the infinite connectability of the post- and pre-modern, the queer and the medieval that we become queer medieval. By embracing nonprogressive, nonterminating processes of becoming we can create queer, heteroclitic histories which will lead to (sometimes asymptotic) lines of flight that challenge the borders of what has been, what is, and what (probably) will be. We have not got (queer) medieval just yet.

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¹ This has occasioned a new rash of polemics including charges of the continued disappearing of lesbians (see Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* [London: 2003] and queers of color. Even that queer means gay white men inhabiting a postindustrial, posthomophobic, patriarchal world of privilege. See 'Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International', ed. Heidi J. Nast, a special issue of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 34.5 (2002).

² *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

³ On the enemy-friend see Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997). This isn't meant to elide the fact that most medievalists (particularly historians) have chosen to simply ignore queer theory and that heteronormative assumptions still bedevil the field in general (even some scholarship which historicizes sexuality).

⁴ David M. Halperin, *How to Do The History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵ See Karma Lochrie, 'Desiring Foucault,' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 3–16.

⁶ Judith Butler, 'Against Proper Objects,' *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (2–3), Summer-Fall 1994: 1–27.

⁷ This is an unintentional reference to the 'Future of the Queer Past' conference, a transnational history conference held at the University of Chicago in September 2000. I thank Greg Hutcheson for reminding me about this event.

⁸ One exception among many is the wonderful work on queer Iberia. See 'Return to Queer Iberia,' special forum in *La Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Spanish Language and Literature* 30.1 (Fall 2001), ed. Sidney O'Donnell and Gregory S. Hutcheson. See also Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson, *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999). Work has appeared on Islamic, Indian, African, South Asian, Russian, Japanese and Early American sexualities. See *Siting Queer Masculinities, 1550–1800*, ed. Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, forthcoming) for a snapshot.

⁹ But see Francesca Canadé Sautman, "'Just Like a Woman": Queer History, Womanizing the Body, and the Boys in Arnaud's Band,' Burger and Kruger, p. 168–89.

¹⁰ For example *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *The New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) and Bruce W. Holsinger, 'Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique,' *Speculum* 77 (2002): 1195–1227.

¹¹ Alan Bray, 'A Traditional Rite for Blessing Friendship' in *Love, Sex, Intimacy and Friendship Between Men, 1550–1800*, ed. Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 87–98.

¹² John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

¹³ Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ See Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001) and 'Queering *Sponsalia Christi*: Virginity, Gender and Desire in the Early Middle English Anchoritic Texts' in *New Medieval Literatures* 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 155–176. See also Frederick S. Roden, *Same/Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

¹⁵ Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same/Sex Love From Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Quoted by Lochrie in Burger and Kruger, p. 96 n.8.

¹⁷ Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), Chapter 2.

¹⁸ Susan McHugh, 'Marrying My Bitch: J.R. Ackerley's Pack Sexualities,' *Critical Inquiry* 27.1 (Autumn 2000): 21–41; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 26–38, 232–309.

¹⁹ See Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Garrett P.J. Epp, 'Ecce Homo,' pp. 236–251 in Burger and Kruger; Robert Mills, 'Ecce Homo' in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London, 2002), pp. 152–73; Kathy Lavezzo, 'Sobs and Sighs Between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,' in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise O. Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 175–98.

²⁰ Noreen Giffney, private communication, February 2003. I thank her for sharing her forthcoming work on queer antichristology with me.

²¹ For a start see *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001).

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978).

²³ See Michael O'Rourke, 'In Memoriam-Alan Bray (1948–2001),' pp. 82–86 in O'Donnell and O'Rourke; and Alan Bray, 'Epilogue,' pp. 164–68 in *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tom Betteridge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

²⁴ David M. Halperin 'Introduction: Among Men—History, Sexuality and the Return of Affect,' pp. 1–11 in O'Donnell and O'Rourke.

²⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

²⁶ See the essays by Burger, Kruger, and Biddick in *Queering the Middle Ages*.

²⁷ Glenn Burger, 'Shameful Pleasures: Up Close and Dirty with Chaucer, Flesh, and the Word,' pp. 213–35 in Burger and Kruger, and *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

