

BOOK REVIEWS

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. 345 pp.

The title of this work, with its representation of sexuality as plural and historically contingent, leads the reader to expect that Dinshaw's aim will be to document how pre-modern "sexualities and communities" differ from their postmodern counterparts and, perhaps, to argue that this difference demands that we rethink the postmodern terms we use to categorize medieval sexual groups. This approach is, after all, a familiar one in histories of sexuality, post-Foucault. While discussion of medieval difference certainly has its place in Dinshaw's work, and she does demonstrate that sexuality in late medieval England (her "pre-modern" period of choice) is inextricable from other historically particular discourses, such as those concerning religious heterodoxy, the more striking and central focus of this book is on the possibility of creating certain kinds of sexual communities across time—"queer" communities. Dinshaw argues that a recognition of medieval alterity need not invalidate the "affective" connections that historians and others establish with past lives, and that these affective relationships can and should be fundamental to our contemporary imagination of communities that are both radical and tolerant.

This is not to say that Dinshaw is writing "gay history." While she acknowledges the appeal of works like John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (1980), which posited the existence of a self-consciously "gay" medieval subculture, and thus a cultural heritage for modern homosexuals, Dinshaw eschews identity-based history as both "narrow," noting that the relationships in Boswell's history are largely limited to pairings that "resemble those of urban gay males in the United States in the 70s and 80s" (30), and conservative, in that its narratives reproduce naturalized modern categories. In contrast, her queer community provocatively dismembers distinctions based on essential identity. The queers in her study include the seemingly heterosexual Margery Kempe, the transvestite prostitute John/Eleanor Rykener, Lollard authors of anti-sodomitical tracts, and the sexually ambiguous Pardoner of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is an unusual grouping, made the more so by including post-structuralist historians Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and "Bob," the narrator of Robert Gluck's postmodern novel, *Margery Kempe*. "Queer" is clearly a flexible category, one which does not require sameness, or interchangeability, from the people or texts to which it is attached.

Yet the subjects of her study do share something: an ability to expose the arbitrariness of hegemonic categories, whether medieval or modern. Margery Kempe's behavior, for example, confuses the distinctions between wife and virgin, orthodox and heretic; John/Eleanor Rykener's deposition confounds the London legal apparatus and the gender divisions foundational to it; and the anti-

sodomitical rhetoric of Lollard texts contains a “tenebrous element [that] . . . darkens any clear opposition between catholic and heretic, makes the ‘other’ hard to pin down” (57). The postmodern members of Dinshaw’s community are also celebrated for their admittance of “desubjectifying” category confusion, though their portraits in *Getting Medieval* suggest not only the rupture of sexual boundaries but of temporal distance as well. Dinshaw describes Barthes’ somatic “performance” of the experiences of the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet and also Foucault’s intense, affective response to reading about the lives of the socially discarded and historically inaccessible. The connections these historians feel with their subjects are “partial connections” (a term Dinshaw borrows from Donna Haraway) and they are a model for the relations that Dinshaw draws between the various subjects of her attention and for her own affective and critical relations with these. What they share and what she shares with them is a destabilizing position in relation to hegemonic norms.

A shared position, and perhaps a shared attitude. “Queer” (it should be clear by now) is a deconstructive tactic for Dinshaw; as such, it implies not only the potential to confound norms but the intent to do so. To be fair, Dinshaw does not make this claim across the board for all of her subjects, but, with the exception of the Lollards, she offers some encouragement for viewing them as self-consciously engaged in a “performance” of sex/gender and, thus, as self-consciously resisting naturalizing structures. We can appreciate this gesture as an attempt to dignify the marginalized queers of history, but it can be problematic. When discussing the London prostitutes alluded to in Rykener’s deposition, for example, Dinshaw writes:

Women, particularly harshly regulated by gender in this culture . . . are the ones who know best how to exploit the fact that gender can be performed. Women . . . are the ones in Rykener’s narrative who exploit the dominance of gender expectations. They capitalize on gender expectations, making gender work for them. (111)

There is little evidence given for a consciousness of radical “performance” in this case, and readers may well also object to the linked characterization of prostitutes as blithely “exploiting” the system, and/or the privileging of narrative representation over the facts of an economic base.

On this last issue, Dinshaw clearly states in her introduction that she is working against the assumptions of “positivist history.” The emphasis of her readings is overwhelmingly on the “fissured and contradictory” in “systems of representation” (12), including current historical narratives. Medievalists who are not sympathetic to deconstructive criticism, or who are looking for a history that emphasizes chronology and causality, are likely to be frustrated. And a goodly portion of the book is given over to analysis of the place of the medieval in post-structuralist cultural theory. It is very unlikely that scholars who have little patience with post-structuralism will want to read through Dinshaw’s rather difficult discussions of theorists like Homi Bhabha and Foucault. But this is a pity. For one of the things that Dinshaw ultimately does best is demonstrate the unexpected

importance of the medieval in recent cultural theory, especially in writings that construct modernity (and, by extension, postmodernity) against a reductive medieval Other. Dinshaw argues persuasively that we need to be aware of the “queerness” of the medieval in narratives of modernity, not so much because, as medievalists, we need to make our period of interest seem more normal to skeptical modernists, but because we are in a unique position to critique the norms of cultural study, as those norms are expressed in both academic theory and in more pragmatic debates about the role of the humanities (such as those surrounding NEH funding). These norms are not merely assumed divisions between men and women, straights and queers, but between past and present as well.

Aside from its eloquent theorizing of medieval studies and the ethics of queer community, *Getting Medieval* offers several other pleasures. Its first chapter, on Lollard and anti-Lollard propaganda, makes an important contribution to the growing study of late medieval English heterodoxy by tracing the place of sexual discourses in orthodox / heterodox debates about clerical privilege and sacramentality. Working from a brief, provocative 1395 manifesto, *The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, Dinshaw argues that, though allusions to sodomy are fundamental to Lollard attacks on “private” religious, this “symptomatic” text reveals a goodly amount of confusion around what, or who, can be perceived as sodomitical. Further, orthodox responses to the *Twelve Conclusions* not only fail to fix this uncertainty but also fail to establish a convincing difference between heterodox and orthodox sexual politics. Dinshaw returns to this discursive indeterminacy in subsequent chapters, showing how it haunts texts such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Margery Kempe’s Book*.

The Lollard chapter is also a fine example of one of the true delights of Dinshaw’s work: her ability to produce a great amount of rich, provocative analysis from slight, seemingly uninspiring or unrevealing texts, even when hampered by a lack of certain contextual information. Her combination of subtle inference and imaginative use of sources for comparison can be quite breathtaking. Command of these skills enables her to cross genres, subjects, and periods with great flair, which, in turn, is an important basis for the “queerness” of the community profiled in *Getting Medieval*.

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