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THE HETEROSEXUAL SUBJECT OF CHAUCERIAN NARRATIVE



“I’M NOT SURE WHAT it has to do with Chaucer, but it’s interesting:” one response to the first session of my graduate Chaucer seminar at Berkeley, a course I’ve titled “The Heterosexual Subject of Chaucerian Narrative.” The “it” bemusedly referred to was a discussion of three essays, by John Boswell, David M. Halperin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The first two argue with each other about how to do the history of sexuality; Boswell seeks to contribute to “the history of gay people,” arguing that there was something that we would call homosexuality (among people whose erotic object choices were of the same sex and who grouped themselves together on this basis) in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Halperin, inspired by Foucault, maintains that sexuality—and thus homo- and heterosexuality—are modern inventions; gay history to him is history from the point of view of gay people today, history that carefully delineates the terms in which sexual experiences were recorded in earlier times and that measures and assesses the differences between those terms and the ones we might use today. Sedgwick meditates on several “axioms” of gay and lesbian studies today, suggesting, among a great many other things, that Foucauldian historians, such as Halperin, who seek a “Great Paradigm Shift” tend to flatten out the varieties of homosexual experience today in their search for differentiations from the past.

Our discussion focused on the differences between “essentialist” and “social-constructionist” arguments, the problems with essentialism, the advantages of essentialism, and the political need to abandon such debates. In fact, the class found a greater similarity, in terms of practical payoff, between Boswell and Halperin than either (I’m sure) would be able or willing to see himself. Further questions were raised about the political importance of the fact that this essentialism/ social constructionist debate configured solely around discussions of male-male sexual relations.

We then read essays by Judith C. Brown and Caroline Walker Bynum, each taking a diametrically opposed view on female sexuality in the late Middle Ages. Brown suggests that women were having what we would now call lesbian experiences in earlier times even if men writing the laws, penitentials, theology, and so on, didn’t know what to call them; Bynum implicitly suggests in this article (explicitly in others) that women’s experiences with other women that look to us like sexual experiences may better be seen as particularly somatic expressions of spirituality and devotion. We attempted to assess the impact of gender on the essentialist/ social constructionist question. And we tried to discern, both for the primary materials and for the secondary arguments what was at stake in either attributing or denying “lesbian” experiences to women in the Middle Ages.

Turning to Chaucer, we started with the Book of the Duchess (which, as of this date early in the semester, we haven’t finished). We shall continue with Troilus and Criseyde and most of the Canterbury Tales.

What does this lesbian/gay theory stuff have to do with Chaucer? I’m of the mind that

we can talk about “sexuality” in the Middle Ages (pace Halperin), and I’m willing to use the term “homosexuality” “as generically as possible,” as Leonard Barkan has recently written, to denote “erotic relations of any kind between those of the same gender, whatever mentality concerning psyche, society, or identity may accompany them.” I want to free up these terms “sexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “heterosexuality” from any necessarily modern constructions, for use as tools in historical analysis; I thus have taken a position in the class in the Boswell/Halperin debate.

One crucial thing lesbian/gay studies has done—parallel to the great leap forward feminist studies made years ago with gender—is to denaturalize heterosexuality. (An influential document in this process was Adrienne Rich’s still-powerful, if necessarily contested, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”) And an enormously rich era in Western culture in which to study the promotion of normative heterosexuality—that is, intermeshing matrices of normative gender identity and “properly directed desire”—is the late Middle Ages, with its increasing emphasis on conformity. My hope in teaching and writing on this (my book in progress, Straight is the Gate: The Heterosexual Subject of Medieval Narrative, takes up these issues in detail) is to open a perspective on our cultural history which will give us a sharper sense of avenues of resistance to only apparently “natural” forms and institutions.

In this Chaucer course we thus shall be studying heterosexuality and its various disruptions and containments in—and by—the texts. How is heterosexuality configured in various Chaucerian texts? What are its determinants? What other social and cultural structures is it related to? Intermeshed with? We have already, in looking at the Book of the Duchess, come upon a new way of considering the narrator, that typically loveless and out-of-it Chaucerian creature: out of the normative love circuit, as he suggests at the beginning of his narrative, he seems hardly to be able to interpret anything around him, or anything in his dream—unable to understand this either literally or figuratively. This character suggests, that is, that heterosexuality is not something narrowly confined to sexual behavior and mores but is in fact, a hermeneutic. We shall also be looking at mourning in this poem (an elegy) and its relation to gender and desire (picking up an argument in Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble that construes gender and sexuality as themselves melancholic formations).

In Troilus and Criseyde we’ll look at the male-male bonds that seem to be primary, the male-female bonds only secondary, and try to discern the romance’s generic investment in the promotion of heterosexuality. The Canterbury Tales will offer a proliferation of ideological problems, on thematic and formal levels. Our largest concern will be to understand how these Chaucerian texts, in their use of various narrative forms (sermon, elegy, fabliau, romance, for example), perform a regulatory social function: they intend not only to represent but also to reproduce in their audiences a heterosexual subject.

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ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF LESBIANISM IN A GENERAL COURSE ON WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES



I TAUGHT "Women in the Middle Ages" as an advanced seminar, available for credit towards an undergraduate minor or a graduate concentration in Women's Studies. The course was divided into three sections: love, marriage, and divorce; women in the Church; and witchcraft and heresy. I decided to address the question of homosexuality most directly in the context of the third section, although naturally it also came up during the other two parts of the course.

Finding materials, especially materials accessible to students without foreign language skills or background in medieval studies, was the biggest problem. I finally decided to use Judith Brown's book, Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (Oxford, 1986). Even though it is not about the Middle Ages, it does offer some historical background about medieval attitudes toward homoerotic relations between women, citing literary texts, legal codes, and other evidence; and it provides a text from which to raise the whole question of how to define "lesbianism" in the context of medieval society, what to look for in the historical record, and so on. In addition, I recommended that students read two articles by E. Ann Matter: "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 2 (1986): 81-93; and "Discourses of Desire: Sexuality and Christian Women's Visionary Narratives," Journal of Homosexuality 18 (1989): 119-31. Earlier in the semester, during a unit on convent life, I had already distributed a selection of love letters taken from Peter Dronke's Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric (Oxford, 1968), including both letters from women to men and letters from women to other women.

I began the unit on homosexuality by asking the students to think about what the term