

- ⁶ Paulina Wright Davis, "Remarks at the Convention," *The Una* (September 1865): 136-37.
- ⁷ Emily Putnam, *The Lady: A Study of Certain Significant Phases of Her History* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910).
- ⁸ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
- ⁹ Bertha Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After: A Study in the Sociology of the Teutonic Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1913).
- ¹⁰ Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der Alter Welt*. 2nd ed. (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1897).
- ¹¹ Judith Bennett, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992): 147-75.

ON LESBIAN AND GAY/QUEER MEDIEVAL STUDIES

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A graduate student sitting next to me at an MLA panel on "Lesbian and Gay/Feminist Approaches to Middle English Texts" turned to me happily and said: "Thank God, at last it's the year of the queer for medieval studies!" As I thought about his comment, I realized that he was right. Conference papers, scholarly articles, heated e-mail discussions, classroom syllabi, a newly formed scholarly society, books in progress, have been heavily informed by Lesbian and Gay/Queer approaches to texts and culture. *MFN's* participation in this exciting new cultural project not only marks the relationship and profound indebtedness of such approaches to a vibrant feminist scholarship but also indicates some of the directions in which Lesbian and Gay/Queer Medieval Studies is heading. While I agree wholeheartedly with the content of most of the *MFN* essays, I also think there are other issues, not raised sufficiently or explicitly enough in the comments, which must be considered carefully as we begin to shape this field. The remarks that follow should not be considered a critique but rather an addendum to and expansion of those points first enumerated in *MFN's* Spring 1992 issue.¹

One of the primary goals of medieval Lesbian and Gay/Queer Studies should not simply be to re(dis)cover the presence/absence of the male or female sodomite or homosexual—two terms frequently, and problematically, used interchangeably—in medieval culture; nor should it only be to analyze poetry inscribed within the realm of homoerotic desire. Rather, we should also turn our attention to investigating and theorizing the socio-political functions/roles/uses of sodomy as *constructed* by the *dominant* heterosexist and patriarchal medieval order, for such an investigation allows us an insight into medieval heterosexuality as well. In these texts, while same-sex sexual activity is theoretically prohibited, the representation of sodomy and the sodomite, a subaltern frequently constructed through the dominant order, serves an important ideological role: to regulate normative medieval sexual activity and (gendered) social practice. Since sodomy, especially male-male anal sex, exceeded the boundaries of proper sex and gender categories, its vilified representation and subsequent violent containment policed/constructed those very boundaries and attempted to make impossible their transgression, both imagined and real.

Hence sodomy, while frequently represented as a threat to cultural maintenance, was paradoxically a cultural *necessity*, a necessity effectively sublimated and displaced into the Other yet always dangerously threatening to reveal its proximity to the Same—a function of what Jonathan Dollimore calls the “perverse dynamic” of sexual dissidence. Thus central to, and an integral product of, a cultural order that attempted to obliterate sexual dissidence yet needed such dissidence to consolidate itself, sodomy played a crucial role in the constitution of the late medieval (heterosexual) imaginary and its sexual/political unconscious. Examining the homophobic textual representations of sodomy and homosexual desire from this perspective serves a dual role: it not only allows us to study the heterosexist construction of the subordinate homosexual subject but also provides us a way to analyze—and ultimately deconstruct—medieval (and modern) heterosexuality/textuality on a larger scale. If Western culture is at heart homosocial and *homosexual*, as Irigaray argues—and I think she is correct—then exposing the centrality of homosexuality to it has radically disruptive potential for the heterosexual (gendered) subject as the stable norm. Having now read a large number of medieval French, Latin, Italian, and English texts of theological, legal, and literary discussions of sodomy and same-sex desire, I have become convinced that it is this fear of disruption, much more than the theological imperative, which motivated homophobia—and its complex relationship to medieval misogyny.

The theoretical and practical insights gained from such a perspective can in turn be used to provide new readings of literary texts—in my case late Middle English poetry such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a subject of my book. For example, critics discussing the bedroom scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* frequently point out its parallels to and ironic use of other types of exchanges and quests to satisfy desire in the poem. What they normally do *not* discuss, however, is the way that Gawain’s encounters with Bercilak’s wife can be read against the normative grain both to problematize the relationship between homosocial/homosexual desire and to explore the typical medieval alliance of misogyny and homophobia to maintain a dominantly hetero-centric male social control.²

In an act of homosocial bonding, Gawain and his host Bercilak have vowed an exchange: Gawain must give to his host whatever he receives in the castle, and Bercilak will do the same outside the castle walls. Each day as Bercilak goes hunting, Gawain is tempted sexually and “hunted” in his bedroom by Bercilak’s wife. It is here that an imbrication of homosexual and heterosexual activity, through the guise of chivalry and courtly love, occurs. For if Gawain yields to his desires for the woman, taking her in effect, he will also be bound to yield his “winnings” to Bercilak, to submit to him sexually. In other words, his (hetero)sexual role with a woman would also necessitate a passive (homo)sexual one with a man, and the explicitly heterosexual act would necessarily (always already) carry a homosexual valence. His heterosexual desires are thus positioned to be intimately bound up with potential homosexual activity—the homosexual here being *directly* connected to his homosocial and chivalric relationship and oath to Bercilak. Ironically, then, it is a *lack* of homosexual desire that controls or proscribes the physical consummation of heterosexual desire. Using Irigaray’s theories of the *homosexual* economy as a way of understanding this conflation of the heterosexual and the homosexual, I would argue that *Sir Gawain* momentarily unmasks

the underpinnings of the medieval male (homo)social order and its heterosexual desire/exchange of women as displaced homosexual desire. In this context, even the kisses that Gawain exchanges with the lady and subsequently with Bercilak carry a double valence, simultaneously (de)mystifying the homosexual subtext of medieval society.

But the poem's socio-political valence is ultimately not to subvert or deconstruct male heterosexuality—though it does do so momentarily—but rather to legitimate misogyny by relating it to homosexuality. It is in fact this momentary unmasking of the unacceptable homosexual underpinnings of chivalric and heterosexual desire that helps to explain the misogyny at the poem's end—where Gawain damns all women for his predicament and cowardice—a misogyny that many critics have seen as “mysterious” or “uncalled for.” Since, as Irigaray argues, exposing the homosexual roots of male homosexual/homosocial interaction is threatening to any system of heterosexual patriarchy, such exposure must be contained and remade as *unproblematic* in some way. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, misogyny clearly becomes the vehicle for such containment. As the poem reveals the female agency and motivation of Morgan le Fay as responsible both for the Green Knight's appearance at court and the exchange game at Bercilak's castle, it thus posits a gynocratic order in which *men* are exchanged and used as pawns in the working out of female jealousies and power struggles. Most importantly, it is through this gynocracy, the poem's logic reveals, that Gawain's “natural” homosociality and heterosexual desires have been forcibly cathected to homosexual ones. In other words, this demystification of male homosexuality is, in effect, woman's fault—a function of the feminine Other. Hence the “perversion” of the homosexual/homosocial into the homosexual is effectively and misogynistically displaced onto this gynocracy—a displacement found in several other medieval texts as well. In an insidious but typical move, the poem ultimately uses homosexuality—and by implication homophobia—to legitimate misogyny and female disempowerment.

Seen from this perspective, the girdle, associated with sodomy in some little known Middle High German texts, exchanged here between Sir Gawain and Bercilak's wife—and later disseminated to the entire Arthurian court—symbolizes not just Gawain's cowardice and deceit, as most critics argue, but also the social and sexual threat of female power and control to the male heterosexual imaginary order—an order simultaneously threatened with the potential desublimation of homosexual desire. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* thus uses the threat of same-sex sexual activity to maintain a dominant heterosexual male subject position while it makes clear the relationship between medieval homophobia and misogyny, discursively legitimating medieval patriarchy's sexual and social institutions.

Certainly, Sir Gawain's quests have discovered much more than traditional criticism has allowed. And it is this and related kinds of *dis*-covery to which I hope the new Lesbian and Gay/Queer Scholarship will turn its attention.

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Besides the sources listed in the original *MFN* essays, I would add the following as theoretically useful:

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¹ While it will be clear from what follows that I write as someone whose theoretical/practical training and area-focus is literary, I do not mean to imply that such an approach is limited to the study of medieval literary texts. I feel strongly that the insights gained from Gay and Lesbian/Queer theory can be adapted effectively for all types of medieval discourse—e.g., literary, historical, artistic, theological, and political.

² The following reading of Sir Gawain is taken from a chapter of my forthcoming book *Sodomy, Silence, and Social Control in Late Middle English Verse*.

WOMEN AND MEDIEVAL ART HISTORY



ON GENDER ISSUES AND THE TEACHING OF MEDIEVAL ART: SOME RECENT RESOURCES

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Art history is a conservative discipline, as Diane Wolfthal has rightly noted.¹ Despite some pioneering studies of women in medieval art in the 1970s and early 1980s,² many of us have begun to incorporate gender issues into our courses only fairly recently. The last year or two has seen a spate of conference sessions and publications devoted to feminist approaches to medieval art. Those of us seeking alternatives to traditional surveys have found this outpouring heartening and enormously helpful. This note will summarize some of these developments, particularly those with a pedagogical emphasis. For the 1992 Kalamazoo conference Sue Ellen Holbrook of TEAMS co-organized two round-table sessions entitled, "Resources for Teaching about Women in Art History." The session featured talks by Annemarie Weyl Carr ("Hildegard of Bingen: A Woman and her Images"), Janet Marquardt-Cherry ("Sources for Eve and Mary"), and Jane Welch Williams ("Images of Women at Chartres"). Prof. Williams also distributed copies of her syllabus for a course on women and medieval art (see below).

Byzantinists have also begun to plan sessions and gather materials for introducing feminist issues in the classroom. The 1992 Kalamazoo session on teaching spawned a second session, at the Byzantine Studies Conference at the University of Illinois this past fall. Thalia Gouma-Peterson organized this workshop, called "Teaching about Women in Byzantium: Approaches and Methodologies." Presenters included Thelma K. Thomas