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Abstract

The Medieval era is sometimes overlooked within the field of Queer and Transgender History, but a recent shift in focus has revealed new discoveries and interpretations. This historiographical analysis posits that in the Middle Ages, gender and sexuality were much more fluid than previously believed.

Keywords

Medieval History, Trans History, Queer History, Historiography

Lenses, Focus, and Fluidity: Lessons from Medieval Queer History

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Saint Joan of Arc (c. 1412 – 1431) broke gender boundaries nearly every day of her short life. She was a successful military leader who had mystic visions and was subsequently burned at the stake. Recent scholarship has offered unique trans readings of Joan's life, and some like M.W. Bychowski argue that Joan's wearing of masculine clothing and fulfillment of a societal role considered masculine was what culminated in her execution. Bychowski demonstrates that "whether or not Joan was transmasculine, Joan's life was constrained by socio-cultural norms that were not only gendered, but virulently transphobic. Joan's death was the direct result of medieval transphobia."¹ New readings on Saint Joan of Arc's story prove how useful queer and transgender lenses are at understanding medieval society. It is not queer historians' goal to prove Joan as living under a transmasculine identity not yet defined.² Still, trans and queer

¹ Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, "Introduction," In *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 12.

² Martha G. Newman "Assigned Female at Death: Joseph of Schonau and the Disruption of Medieval Gender Binaries," In *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*

lenses provide useful insight into the gender norms of medieval societies.

Medieval historians explore gender and sexuality using queer and transgender lenses to recover non-conforming lives and make them visible. As transgender activist Leslie Feinberg wrote, “I couldn't find myself in history. No-one like me seemed to have ever existed.”³ Recovering queer history is essential towards working for transgender rights because society must accept the existence of transgender lives past and present. There was participation of queer and genderqueer peoples in medieval society, which are recorded in many prescriptive sources such as law codes, penitentials, and court records. People living in modernity attempt to impose definitions onto people who did not have said definitions. Still, gender was much more fluid in the past, and when one reads with trans and queer lenses, one reads history with the possibility of fluidity. With an open mind and without these rigid, modern definitions, they realize medieval society viewed gender dynamically, giving credence to today’s arguments in favor of queer and transgender rights.

State of the Field:

in Medieval Hagiography, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 49.

³ Spencer-Hall and Gutt, “Introduction,” 11.

The historic and literary study of non-heterosexual and genderqueer identities in the medieval era is an emerging trend in both medieval and queer historiography. This year Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt released their edited collection of essays, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, which utilized critical theories to understand queer gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages. However, this was not the first investigation into medieval queer sexuality: James A. Brundage and Vern L. Bullough released their highly useful *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* in 1996 soon after the start of the study of queerness in 6th to 14th century Europe. Brundage and Bullough first investigate sexual norms, and the second section of their book dealt with “Variance from Norms” through homosexuality, lesbianism, cross-dressing, prostitution, and even castration.⁴ Both of their introductions gave vital insight into the workings and changes within the field from the 1990s to the present.

Over time, the quantity and diversity of historians working on these topics increased, suggested by the introductions’ respective notes. Bullough and Brundage’s twenty-three end notes have only one mention of queer sexuality, that being Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. On the other hand, Spencer-Hall

⁴ *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. Edited by Bullough, Vern L. and James A. Brundage (New York, NY: Garland, 2000), 223-242.

and Gutt have eighty-six footnotes in their introduction from blog posts and journal articles on topics ranging from modern queer theory to Anglo-Saxonism's intersection with white supremacy. This change shows how medieval queer studies require. If the Middle Ages are thought of as a time when men were men, women were women, and everyone was the same race and practiced the same religion, then it is the medievalists' drive to provide visibility to this history and teach it.

Academic trans studies and medieval trans studies are not fully established subfields, but they are on the rise. Spencer-Hall and Gutt point out how the most important work in the field is done by graduate students, early career researchers, and adjunct faculty, all of whom are in financially uncertain positions. They encourage financially secure researchers, the majority of which are cisgender, to ally themselves with genderqueer colleagues in need of practical and intellectual support, as "cis privilege also means that trans studies is more readily accepted as valuable when it is undertaken by non-trans researchers."⁵ The two authors further define their purpose for compiling and editing their compendium of essays under trans lenses:

⁵ Spencer-Hall and Gutt, "Introduction," 23.

Trans scholarship brings its insights to bear through specific ways of feeling, knowing, and attending to sources that explore resonances between trans, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming lives across history. The term ‘subjects’ does double duty in the collection’s title, referring to individuals *and* to topics, traces, and resonances which destabilize modern impositions of fixed binary gender on premodern culture(s).⁶

The most important job of medieval queer history is to affirm the existence of gender nonconformity across human space and time. Now is the exciting emergence of this subfield, especially because it does not limit itself to declaring medieval persons as queer. Instead, it looks at actions and values to understand how conceptions of gender change or continue over time.

Sexual Norms and the Women who Disrupt them:

To understand how queer sexuality disrupted the norms of medieval society, one must understand the norms of gendered sexuality that are culturally determined instead of biologically shaped. In “Gendered Sexuality” classicist and medievalist Joyce E. Salisbury argues that gendered sexuality in the Middle Ages came from Greco-Roman views of male and female sexuality. The

⁶ Spencer-Hall and Gutt, “Introduction,” 12.

most important aspect of this difference lays within a sexual hierarchy:

If a man submitted to a passive role in lovemaking, particularly by allowing penetration in a homosexual encounter. (It was perfectly acceptable to be the active partner in a homosexual relationship, since that preserved the all-important gender definition equating activity with masculinity. Oral sexuality with a female partner was much condemned since it, too, inverted the social hierarchy.⁷

It was commonly held within heterosexual bonds that the man had to be the active partner in both his public life and sexual relationships. The Greco-Roman view of sexuality made strong distinctions between active and passive partners, as a man's power was a large characteristic of his supposed "manliness."

The idea of a sexual hierarchy opens up many questions about homosexual relationships and sexual activity. Salisbury cites Paul Veyne's ideas on homosexuality in classical Rome. The roots of medieval understandings of sexuality, "to be active is to be male, whatever the sex of the compliant partner. To take one's pleasure was vertile, [sic] to accept it servile."⁸ Lesbian

⁷ Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York, NY: Garland, 2000), 81-102, 84.

⁸ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 85.

relationships challenged this sexual hierarchy, but it was not considered as dangerous as male homosexuality. Many male writers, often within the church, found sex without male genitalia hard to imagine. As a result, they often assumed lesbian sex could only exist if women used sexual instruments like dildos; only then would they be challenging the sexual hierarchy.⁹ Lesbian sex and relationships challenged this hierarchy, so there are many sources on lesbianism coming from canon law. Still, there are fewer sources on gay men than lesbian women.

According to Judith M. Bennett, gay men can be traced in legal and religious records from before the twentieth century. Descriptive sources by philosophers, monks, and diarists were frequently filled with personal stories. However, lesbian histories are “even more challenging to construct, for even fewer documents tell of past lesbians among their privileged or ordinary folk. Women wrote less; their writings survived less often (...) and they were less likely than men to come to the attention of civic or religious authorities.” In fact, there are confirmed about twelve lesbian women from the medieval millennium, almost all of whom

⁹ Jacqueline Murray, “‘Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible:’ Lesbians in the Middle Ages,” In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York, NY: Garland, 2000), 191-222, 199.

were imprisoned and executed for their activities in the 1400s.¹⁰ Furthermore, most penitentials overlooked lesbianism in comparison to male homosexuality, potentially because female love disrupted the sexual hierarchy less than same-sex male relationships.

Regardless, the knowledge of lesbianism in the Middle Ages comes in part from its disruption of sexual norms, so the majority of the sources are prescriptive rather than descriptive. In a letter from Saint Augustine to a community of nuns around 423CE, Augustine condemns sex and distinguishes between homoerotic activity and homosocial relationships that could be viewed in a more positive light. He declares, “the love between you, however, ought not to be earthly but spiritual, for the things which shameless women do even to other women in low jokes and games are to be avoided not only by widows and chaste handmaids of Christ, living under a holy rule of life, but also entirely by married women and maidens destined for marriage.”¹¹ There was certainly a fear of lesbianism shared by male members within the church, for nuns had to be faithful as brides of Christ. Yet, Augustine still made it clear that married and single women outside the church must not engage in lesbian activities. *The Penitential of Theodore*

¹⁰ Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 1–24, 2-3.

¹¹ Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 195.

also punished lesbian activity, but they did not have the words to describe lesbian identities, saying “If a woman practices vice with a woman, she shall do penance for three years. (...) If she practices solitary vice, she shall do penance for the same period.”¹² Both of these pieces of canonical rhetoric and practice reveal to us that lesbian women existed, but the Middle Ages did not possess the language for it. There were not many explicit definitions of lesbianism, especially as an identity, so these sources reveal that sexuality was defined much more fluidly than today.

An interesting prescriptive source on convent life by Donatus (d. 355) shows how some clerics feared that affection would lead to lesbian sexual expression. He declares through a rule on how nuns ought to sleep:

Each should sleep in a separate bed and they should accept bedding according to the arrangements of the couches as the mother directs. If possible all should sleep in one place (...) Lights should burn in each chamber until day-break. They should sleep clothed, their girdles bound and always ready for divine service with gravity and modesty. (...) Nuns were to sleep together, with a complete lack of privacy, while at the same time they should sleep alone, without an occasion to touch a sister, or see a sister naked.¹³

¹² Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 197.

¹³ Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 196.

Donatus realized that women could have intimate relationships with each other even if they never delved into sexuality. This is why Judith Bennett's new category of 'lesbian-Like' is so essential. Women could have many forms of love with other women, whether they were desirous, sexual, or just in circumstances where they supported and loved other women. There is no simple rubric for lesbianism, so Bennett suggests to apply lesbian definitions onto practices, not persons.¹⁴ Jacqueline Murray agreed with this idea, stating that scholars need a more nuanced understanding of women's relationships, "one that encompasses primary emotional, erotic, and social bonds that stop short of genital sexual expression."¹⁵ In these ways, lesbian readings of medieval women reveal more about the society in which they lived, not an identity that was not yet defined.

Now, there are some more cases that reveal what medieval people understood about lesbianism. One ninth-century Arabic document sought to 'cure the disease' of lesbian desires. In fact, there was one recipe that made "lesbianism so desirable that they would keep busy with it and passionately lust for it forgetting about their work," and it would consume women's minds to the

¹⁴ Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 9-10, 14.

¹⁵ Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 194.

extent they would need to force themselves out of it to function.¹⁶ There is record of a 1405 appeal by a young woman named Laurence and an accused woman named Jehanne, who “climbed on her as a man does on a woman, and the said Jehanne began to move her hips and do as a man does to a woman.” They both worked in fields nearby, and they were both prosecuted when others found out about their relationship. The court would not persecute Jehanne because of the age of consent; it was the lesbian relationship that was under scrutiny. A similar record from sixteenth-century Seville warned that lesbian women in prison who used dildos and hard language on other women (again, lesbian sex was not considered sex if there was not an instrument) could receive up to 200 lashes and be exiled.¹⁷ Lesbianism was punished, but records of this punishment prove its existence and lesbian experiences as valid in the greater context of human history. If the goal of medieval queer history is visibility, then the prescriptive law codes help historians achieve it even if they present the Middle Ages as archaic in our modern constructions.

The category of “lesbian-like” is incredibly important to how medieval historians approach queer sexuality through the documents at hand. Some might think that the use of the word

¹⁶ Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 200.

¹⁷ Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 202-204.

“lesbian” when referring to the premodern era is anachronistic, so lesbian-like offers ways to circumvent the more present phenomenon of lesbian identity and look at different ways women could love each other. Whether the understanding of sexuality in medieval society is based on identity or different forms of lesbian love, queer experiences do not need to fit rigid definitions to reaffirm the validity and representation of queer people today.

Gender Norms and the People who Disrupt Them:

The majority of information on the disruption of gender norms in the Middle Ages comes from evidence of cross-dressing. Similar to Bennett’s category of “lesbian-like” women, scholars cannot find outright declarations about an identity for which Medieval people did not have the language to describe. So, the answers lie in studying gender nonconforming actions rather than people’s spoken identity. Looking at behaviors instead of proclamations of identity prevents any aforementioned concerns over anachronism as well, so it is the most useful method of investigating gender norms and their breakages in the Middle Ages.

There is the interesting case of a woman cross-dressing to disguise herself as a man in the early 1400s; although her name is unknown. She lived as a man for two years in order to study at the

University of Krakow in Poland, for the University system was closed to women across medieval Europe. She did it “for the love of learning” (*amore Studii*), and she was revered by her peers for augmenting herself as a man, eventually becoming an abbess nearby.¹⁸ Females wearing male clothing were much more respected than men who cross-dressed as women. In a patriarchal society they would be admired because of their drive for a higher status, rationality, and holiness.¹⁹ This unnamed woman studied and did things not normally allowed to women, and she impressively concealed herself as a man in such a male-dominated space for a long time:

The account of her deception notes that she did not frequent the baths (where male students would have gone in search of prostitutes as well as cleanliness), but it tells us that she lived in a student hostel, that she attended lectures regularly, and that she got on well with her fellow students. In other words, she likely shared beds with men, disrobed in the presence of men, urinated in their company, and somehow managed, through all this, to conceal her breasts, her menstrual blood, her genitalia.²⁰

¹⁸ Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 17.; Bennett cites Michael Shank, “A Female University Student in Late Medieval Krakow,” *Signs* 12:2 (1987): 373-380.

¹⁹ Vern L. Bullough, “Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages.” In *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York, NY: Garland, 2000), 223-242, 227, 232.

²⁰ Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 17.

Bennett suggests that if she could pass as a male and lived sociably for years, then other medieval women motivated by love and sexual desire might have done the same. It seems highly likely that other medieval women were able to take on male personas and received respect for their decision if discovered.

It was less tolerated for men to impersonate and cross-dress as women, but there were certain situations where it was admissible. According to Bullough, male cross-dressing “not only led to a lower status but was suspect because most male writers could find only one possible explanation for a man’s adopting woman’s guise, namely a desire to have easier access to women for sexual purposes.”²¹ This bias also makes sense, given both the sexual hierarchy and the heterosexual gaze of the majority of the male writers. Gregory of Tours suspected that if male cross-dressing was not done for sexual reasons, then he would assume it was an act of paganism associated with witchcraft. Further evidence of society’s refusal to accept male cross-dressing lies in the penitentials of Silos, which stipulated that male-cross dressing required a one-year penance. St. Hubert’s penitential in the Frankish kingdom required a penance for three years for similar

²¹ Bullough, “Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages,” 232.

behaviors. However, men impersonating women was completely accepted when the person was known to be a man, an example being a male in drag in a society when women were not performing. There is also evidence of knights in a thirteenth century tournament fighting dressed as women, but this seems to be done for its comedic and shock value.²² However, this is the exception to the rule: men who behaved, dressed, and lived as women were still thought of as sexual deviants and were punished accordingly.

Ending with David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras' 1995 discovery of a late medieval English legal document on a transfeminine woman, Eleanor Rykener. It is apparently the only extant document of same-sex intercourse from the time and place, and the court case only examined "two men charged with [sexual] immorality, one of which implicated several persons, male and female, in religiou[s] orders." Eleanor [dead name: John] Rykener was brought to court after being detected wearing women's clothing, calling herself Eleanor, and having sex with various Sirs and clergymen. Eleanor not only identified herself as a woman in court, but she also worked as an embroideress in Oxford. Her career as an embroideress strongly suggests she was a trans

²² Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages," 227, 233-235.

woman, for she lived and worked with women.²³ Her feminine identity went beyond sex; Eleanor seemed to live as a woman in almost all aspects of her life. Still, this court document relies on acts rather than feelings, so scholars do not truly know whether she identified as a woman.

The emerging and evolving field of medieval queer history is nothing short of exciting. Historians are unlocking better understandings of how gender norms are created and change over time. Additionally, they are providing visibility to queer and gender nonconforming people of today, for they have often been unable to see themselves in history. Finally, they are proving that gender does not require rigid definitions to be understood. In the past, gender and sexuality were much more fluid than previously believed. This fact gives credence to queer and trans activists who want to further understand gender and sexuality for not only their personal experiences but also political liberation. For these reasons, the study of medieval gender and sexuality has a direct impact on the important discourses of today, so it is now time to educate students and the public on these recent discoveries.

²³ David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1995), 459-465.

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