

SEX AND THE MIDDLE AGES

The combination of “medieval Europe” and “sexuality” conjures up one of two images in most people’s minds. One is a vision of total repression. A church controlled by celibate men defines all sexual acts and thoughts as impure. Any sexual behavior or thought is a sin calling for severe acts of penance. Even marital sex for the purpose of reproduction is barely tolerable; it becomes a sin if the participants enjoy it. Sexuality threatens human salvation: it is a nearly irresistible force, but a force for evil. The devil is always at the ready to use sexual temptation to drag humankind to destruction and damnation.

Plenty of medieval texts support this vision of negative and repressive medieval attitudes toward sexuality. We can look, for example, at the Desert Fathers tradition. In the late antique period (fourth to fifth centuries) there were several collections of the sayings and deeds of the monks who lived in individual cells (eremitic monasticism) or in groups (cenobitic monasticism) in the Egyptian desert. These texts were translated into Latin and then into the various European vernaculars, and became quite popular. The tales include stories of heroic penance for sexual thoughts. In one story, the devil sends a woman to tempt a monk. She claims to be lost, and asks to stay in his cell because she is afraid of wild beasts. As a thirteenth-century French poetic version tells it:

The monk soon had great desire of her ... and he knew well that it was the devil who caused him so much anguish And when he burned with the most passion he said, “Those who do such things go into torment. This will test whether you can suffer the eternal fire where you must go.” And he extended his finger and put it in the flame But the finger did not feel the heat, because he was so filled with fleshly fire. Thus one after the other he held his fingers in the fire, so that they were all burned by daybreak.¹

When we reflect on the pervasiveness and popularity of stories like this, we cannot help thinking of medieval Europe as a culture with a very negative attitude to sex. Sexual desire had to be combated even at the cost of great personal hardship; it was a pollutant and a threat to the soul. This book treats the whole period of the Middle Ages in western Europe – roughly 500–1500 – and attitudes of course changed over this time period, but, as the thousand-year popularity of this particular story indicates, some understandings of the role of sex in human affairs were very persistent.

Opposite this strict and sin-wracked image stands an earthier one. Lusty priests seduce the women who confess to them; noblemen keep mistresses; monks and nuns engage in secret liaisons; peasants couple behind hedgerows. This view dismisses the church and its repressive teachings as full of hypocrisy and generally ignored by medieval people, who went about their daily business with a zest that disappeared later in a more puritan age.

Medieval texts support this earthy, lustful, playful version as well. The stories of Chaucer, Boccaccio, or the French *fabliaux* (humorous rhymed stories) are good examples. In one story of a wife deceiving her husband with a young lover:

She urged her scholar to begin
The game of love. He played so well
He wouldn't have given a hazel shell
For any other game, and neither
Would she, for they played well together.
They had good fun while the time sped.
They cuddled and kissed²

In stories like this, both men and women find joy in sexual intercourse. They do what comes naturally. Sin is not an issue, nor is reproduction. This story is not subversive, underground literature, nor is it the medieval equivalent of the porn video. Scholars argue about whether the audience for *fabliaux* like this one, and similar literature, was aristocratic or bourgeois, but these stories were read and enjoyed openly by both men and women, no doubt including many members of the church hierarchy.

Both these views of medieval sexuality are true. That is, both images of the medieval European world reflect the way some people living at that time saw themselves and their culture. It is not just that attitudes changed over time – although they did; it is also the case that many different attitudes coexisted within a single culture.

Yes, these images are contradictory. So are many of the views on sexuality found in contemporary culture. If you think about the sexual attitudes of people you know, you will find not only that different people have different views, but even that a single individual may hold many different views, depending on circumstances. People learn and understand culture at many

different levels. Sex is a particularly complicated issue because it involves questions of religious morality, public order, and gender relations as well as the individual psyche. It should not be a surprise that a complicated issue generates a complex web of attitudes. This book, then, will not search for the medieval view of sexuality, but rather for the multiplicity of views that describes the medieval experience.

The two stereotypical images of medieval sexuality are heavily gendered. While both reflect medieval attitudes, it is fair to say that the first, repressive attitude, associated with the medieval church, carried over into the secular culture more commonly with regard to women's sexuality; the second, earthy attitude, associated with lay culture, carried over into the ecclesiastical realm more commonly with regard to men's. Women's behavior was sinful and polluting, men's was obeying the dictates of nature. Again, the concept of a double standard is familiar to any modern reader. My argument throughout this book goes beyond saying that the same act was seen differently for men and for women. In many cases, medieval people did not see what the two partners did in sexual intercourse as the same act at all.

Medieval people, for the most part, understood sex acts as something that someone did to someone else. The subtitle of this book, *Doing Unto Others*, reflects this idea. The most common verbs used for sexual intercourse today – “to have sex,” “to make love” – are intransitive. They are actions that two people do together, not actions that one person does to another. Even “to fuck,” which began as a term implying penetration, has come to be used intransitively, or interchangeably of men and women: “they fucked” or “she fucked him” are perfectly comprehensible (if vulgar).

Medieval terminology was different. The subject of the French verb *foutre*, for example, in modern French can be a man, a woman, or a couple, but the older meaning was “to penetrate” and the subject was always a man. The same was usually true of the English *swiven*. The *Middle English Dictionary* recognizes two meanings of *swive*, “to have sexual intercourse” and “to have sexual intercourse with (a woman).” There are many more examples of the second, transitive meaning, and in all the man is the subject and the woman the object.³ The Latin *concubere* has an original meaning of “to lie with,” and might seem gender-neutral, but in fact is most often used with a masculine subject. For example, in the 1395 interrogation of a male transvestite prostitute in London, the summary of his testimony reported that a certain priest “lay with him [*concubuit*] as with a woman,” but that he himself “lay [*concubuit*] as a man with many nuns.”⁴ A medieval English text about the sinfulness of lust carefully explained that the sin was on both parties, “the man that doth and the woman that suffreth.”⁵

These linguistic forms reflected a general way of thinking about sex in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the relation between the active and passive in grammar and the active and passive in sexual intercourse was not lost on medieval people. In the twelfth century Alain of Lille wrote a poem entitled *The*

Plaint of Nature, in which he drew an analogy between grammar and men who pervert nature by playing a passive role in intercourse. "The active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex. A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex He is subject and predicate; one and the same term is given a double application." Personified Nature herself says that "the human race, fallen from its high estate, adopts a highly irregular (grammatical) change [metaplasms] when it inverts the rules of Venus by introducing barbarisms in its arrangement of genders."⁶ The role of nature and the natural in medieval understandings of sexuality will be discussed later in this chapter; for now, the important point is that medieval people in general understood the active and the passive role in sex to be two very different things.

The roles of "active" and "passive" partner did not necessarily have anything to do with who was pursued and who was pursuer, or who enjoyed sex more. Women were thought to be more lustful than men. Their supposed passivity didn't mean that they did not initiate the sexual relationship, nor did it mean that they were expected to lie still on their backs. It meant that they were the receptive partners; they were penetrated. Similarly the distinction between "active" and "passive" in male-male intercourse referred to the penetrator and penetrated. (This distinction sometimes breaks down in discussions of fellatio, but as noted in Chapter 5 such discussions were rare in the Middle Ages.)

Sexual intercourse was understood as something that one person did to another. One consequence of this was that the two partners were not understood to be doing the same thing or having the same experience. Mutuality was not important in the medieval conceptualization of sex. Since it was most often the case that the two partners were of different sexes, it follows that medieval people understood men's and women's experiences of sex acts as quite different. Where the partners were of the same sex, this created further conceptual problems. Medieval texts reveal, for example, a good deal of confusion about the moral status of erotic acts between women, which often were not considered sex unless one of the women penetrated the other with a dildo.

The fact that men and women were seen as experiencing sex differently dictates in part the organization of this book. Although modern scholars have recognized that the experience of rape in the Middle Ages was different for the perpetrator and the victim, they have seen other sex acts (fornication, adultery, prostitution, homosexual behavior) as a single type of act, roughly the same in social and moral terms for both partners. Because the acts were not really the same for both partners, this book is organized not by the type of sex act, but by the status of the individuals who committed the act (or who did not commit it, in the case of the chapter on chastity).

Organizing the book with separate chapters on men and women may not seem particularly controversial, but it is worth making explicit the

underlying assumptions. Some scholars have argued that medieval understandings of sex and gender were not binary. Some say that for medieval scientists who followed Aristotle, for example, there was only one sex, the male, and females were defective males. Others argue that because sexual reproduction was so common an expectation for men and women in medieval society, those who chose celibacy and renounced reproduction became not men or women, but a third gender.

On the contrary, the binary opposition between men and women was extraordinarily strong in medieval society. Although theorists might write that females were defective males, their defects were significant enough that no one seriously considered them the same as males; they were in a quite different category. The category was lower in the hierarchy – it was definitely not “separate but equal” – and the category difference was very real both to scientists and to other medieval people. Similarly, those who did not reproduce might be considered in some ways “not real men” or “not real women,” but no medieval person would have any problem identifying nuns as women and monks as men. Women who transgressed the expectations for their gender did not thereby become not-women; they became deviant women, and the same was true for men. Indeed, sometimes such deviants would even be considered hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine, deviating from expectations by taking to an extreme the qualities that others of their gender kept under control. A woman who played a masculine role in sex, or a man who played a feminine role, did transgress, but they did not thereby become a member of the opposite, or a third, gender. The dichotomy remained.

The way people understood particular sex acts is not the same thing as the way they understood sexuality as a field of human experience. Before turning to medieval sexuality specifically, I need to digress and discuss the concept of “sexuality.” Like most other general concepts, it can be used to mean a number of different things, and it is important to specify what it means in a given context. Many scholars would argue that it is anachronistic even to talk about sexuality with regard to medieval Europe, but this is not the case. It may not be a concept medieval people had – there is no word in any of the medieval languages that translates precisely as “sexuality” – but nor is there any word that translates precisely to “political culture” or “affective piety” or “patriarchal family” or a host of other terms we have no problem using to describe the Middle Ages.

The study of sexuality

The term “sexuality,” as scholars use it, refers to the whole realm of human erotic experience. Sexuality is the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves. As a field of study the history of sexuality is different from the history of sex, which has to do with who did what with (or to) whom. Some authors prefer to use “history of sexualities” in

the plural to emphasize difference: sexuality is not just one thing, dissident sexualities must be included in any history. But "history of sexuality" is not the same thing as "history of sexualities." "A sexuality" is a way of being or a form of desire that is more fundamental to the individual than a preference: "sexual identity" and "sexual orientation" are related (modern) terms used to express this. In the contemporary world, heterosexuality and homosexuality would be the most prominent sexualities. A "history of sexualities" would be one that traced the antecedents of those and other categories. But a "history of sexuality" is a more comprehensive term. Just as one may speak of different chemistries, but "chemistry" can still be used to describe the field as a whole, the study of sexuality comprises the study of different sexualities, and also the meanings of sex for people who did not identify themselves with particular sexualities as we now understand them.

The terms sex, gender, and sexuality (as both scholarly discourse and casual conversation today use them, and as they are used here) have distinct meanings. "Sex" refers to the physical facts of male and female bodies: genes, hormones, genitalia, and so forth. "Gender" refers to masculinity and femininity, patterns of behavior and identity. "Sexuality" refers to orientation or desire. Thus a person today might be of the male sex, but have a female gender identity and a bisexual orientation. The three terms overlap in common usage even today. It is important for our purposes to recognize that in the Middle Ages the distinction among the three was not just blurred, it did not exist. If someone deviated from the expected models of sexual behavior, people did not assume that the variation was a matter of biology *or* gender identity *or* sexual desire; the three worked together. Whereas we might say that an individual has a female body, a feminine identity or behavior, and a sexual desire for women, medieval people would have assumed that the desire for women came from a masculine body and, in itself, constituted masculine behavior. For them, sexuality was not separate from sex and gender; therefore this book will have much to say about what we moderns call sex and gender in the Middle Ages as well as about sexuality.

The media and popular discourse today frame the discussion about different sexualities around the question of whether they are inborn ("hard-wired") or a matter of choice or lifestyle. Scholarly discussion has focused on a somewhat different question: are sexualities essential (that is, do they have a reality on their own and exist across cultures?) or are they socially constructed (are they created by the meanings given by different cultures to sex acts?)? The general consensus today is that sexuality is socially constructed. It is not written in the body but created by society. A person might perform the same acts in a variety of cultures, but they would not express the same sexuality in all those cultures, because the acts would have different meanings and are understood differently. As the classicist David Halperin puts it: "Sex has no history. It is a natural fact, grounded in the functioning of the body, and, as such, it lies outside of history and culture.

Sexuality, by contrast, does not properly refer to some aspect or attribute of bodies. Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect."⁷

A more concrete example given by classicist Holt Parker runs as follows. An ancient Roman would think that modern Americans have their priorities about sex completely inverted. They put men in jail for committing an act – sex with an underage boy – that (as long as the boy was a slave) he would consider well within the range of acceptable, normal behavior, if perhaps a slightly unusual taste. On the other hand, they boast (on T-shirts, for example) of their prowess at cunnilingus, which he would consider degrading and effeminizing (as indeed would some contemporary subcultures). Presumably the physical acts of pederasty and cunnilingus were performed in much the same way in ancient Rome and the modern United States. But the acts had very different implications for the identities of the people who performed them. An essentialist would argue that a pederast is a pederast wherever and whenever you find him; the social constructionist position, that the sexual and social identity of a man who has sex with underage boys depends on the culture in which he lives, is much more useful in understanding sexuality within the context of the wider society.

This idea that sexuality is a function of culture and society is especially important in tracing the history of same-sex relations. Even to refer to the "history of homosexuality" can be problematic. "Homosexuality" is not a *thing* that one can find in all cultures. Scholars of the ancient Greek and Roman world argue that people at that time classified sexual behaviors or identities not by the gender of the participants but by the sexual role each plays; thus a man who penetrates others is simply playing the appropriate male role, he does not become a "homosexual" merely because those he penetrates are also male. Some scholars deny that there was any concept of the "homosexual" at all before the second half of the nineteenth century, when the term was coined and when sexuality became part of the study of abnormal psychology. Others find that particular sexual identities in other cultures resemble that of the modern "homosexual." But most would agree that to label anyone in the past who had sex with someone of the same sex as "a homosexual" would be to impose a modern category. The same argument also applies to other categories of sexual behavior: heterosexuality, bisexuality, prostitution, or any other; the acts may be the same, but each society will determine what the meaning of those acts is and whether they create identities.

Heterosexuality may seem somewhat simpler. It may seem at first glance that, whether or not a certain minority of people in the Middle Ages should be called "homosexual," the majority certainly were "heterosexual." In thinking about heterosexuality, however, it is especially important to keep in mind the question of whether behaviors and attitudes add up to an identity.

Heterosexuality both in the Middle Ages and today tends to be an unmarked category: most people assume it is normal and thus often do not notice that it is socially constructed in the same way homosexuality is.

If medieval people did not think of "homosexuals" as a category, they did not think of "heterosexuals" as one either. It may be the case that most medieval men had sex only with women and most medieval women had sex only with men, but it would be wrong to attribute to them a consciousness of a heterosexual orientation unless we find evidence for it. In fact, for the most part we do not. If there are no "homosexuals," that does not mean that everyone was "heterosexual"; it means that there are no "heterosexuals" either. Medieval people did not draw the line between gay and straight, but between reproductive and non-reproductive sex. Same-sex activity was not reproductive, but much opposite-sex activity was not reproductive either, and was not excused by the fact that it was "heterosexual."

The opposite of the social constructionist point of view, which the social constructionists call "essentialism," would argue that there are fundamentally different kinds of people in the world, that in every culture there are those with homosexual, heterosexual, and various other orientations. The popular lists of "famous gays in history" are essentialist in conception. Essentialism is implicit in the contemporary search for genetic markers or biological corollaries of a predisposition to homosexuality. It is also congenial to many gay activists who believe that society will be more tolerant if it understands homosexuality as something inborn, not chosen. But the social construction of sexuality does not imply that individuals choose their own identities – it is the way the broader culture gives meaning to sex through medical, legal, or religious systems that creates sexual identities for them, and these identities are very real.

While it might be a more standard academic tactic to argue against the current consensus, in this case the social constructionist position makes a good deal of sense. This book works from the assumption that we must look at how medieval people thought about sexuality, rather than impose our own categories on them. Some people, however, would go much farther and say that not only the particular categories familiar to us, but also the very notion of a sexual orientation or a sexuality, are creations of bourgeois capitalism. This point of view has its roots in the insights of the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his important work *The History of Sexuality*. According to this argument, only in nineteenth-century Europe and North America did people come to view their sexual preferences as part of what constituted them as individuals. People in other societies may have had preferences for a particular type of partner, role, or act, but these preferences did not define them as a type of person. As Foucault wrote: "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in

addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.... Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."⁸ A classification of persons based on sexual behavior was a categorization of convenience in earlier eras, but not psychically deep. (Some influential interpreters argue that saying there was no sexuality before capitalism is a distorted reading of Foucault's views. When Foucault drew his famous acts/identities dichotomy, he was not really saying "earlier there were only acts, in the modern era identities developed," he was speaking of types of discourses or ways of talking about sex. Earlier we have legal enactments which mention only acts; later we have medical and psychological analyses which discuss identities.)

This book rejects the *a priori* argument that sexuality is not a relevant concept for the Middle Ages. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the identities of medieval people were fundamentally shaped by their sexual status – not whether they were homosexual or heterosexual, as today, but whether they were chaste or sexually active. This distinction created a dividing line between two very different kinds of people in medieval society. When it comes to other sexual categories, we have to look at the medieval evidence and decide what kind of sexual categories medieval people used to think with, if they did at all. To dismiss out of hand the possibility that they could have had a concept of sexuality is just as reductive as automatically assuming that their concept of sexuality was the same as ours.

Sources for medieval sexuality

To look at the medieval evidence, of course, is to open up several additional cans of worms. Medieval attitudes about sex have to be pieced together from a variety of sources. Medieval people did not keep diaries. When they did write first-person accounts or memoirs, they were rarely explicit about sexual experiences. The bulk of the extant documents that survive from the Middle Ages was written by monks and clergymen, who had taken vows of chastity. Texts written by women, while not as rare as scholars once thought, are still not common. Much of what we know about sexuality in the Middle Ages, then, is what theologians and canon lawyers thought about it, not what the sexually active common people thought.

Some general issues apply to all medieval sources. First of all, we need to take into account the author. A medieval text does not represent "the medieval attitude" toward a given subject, it presents the attitude of one particular writer, shaped by her or (usually) his social status, education, religion, and occupation. Second, we need to take into account the audience. We do not always know for whom a particular text was written, although