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Introduction: Clearly, Queerly: Toward a Medieval Queer Futurity

During the 1990 Pride Parade, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Queers Read This* was published (later reprinted in 2009). A manifesto, a call-to-arms, a resistance declaration, this influential pamphlet drew attention in stark terms to the problems of straightness, heteronormativity, and respectability politics. The queers that wrote *Queers Read This* attack the corporatization of gay identity and the assimilationism that had begun to creep into queer politics:

Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night.¹

It's about the night. One of the thrusts of the intersection of queer theory and medieval studies is to explore the night: the secrets, the desires, and the heart of historical queer people. What did it mean to be queer in the Middle Ages? It is no secret that this is a political move. Queer medievalists, seeing ways in which the queer has been repressed in contemporary academia, as well as historically, reach back, in the memorable words of Carolyn Dinshaw, “for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time.”²

Medieval Queer Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies offers a reappraisal and new avenues for exploring the role of queer theory and queer subjects in the Middle Ages. This volume addresses exactly where modern medievalists see these glimpses of the queer; from Latin texts written and read in England and France to chivalric works, the contributors mine these contexts in order to structure a more capacious and historically attuned notion of the medieval queer, a necessary move considering the relative paucity of venues dedicated to publishing works centering both on queer theory and medieval texts and subjects.

In 2016, we advertised a call for papers for a subtheme on “Sexuality and the Law” at the Sewanee Medieval Colloquium. Expecting just one panel, we actually

¹ Anonymous, *Queers Read This* (a leaflet distributed at Pride March, New York, June 1990).

² Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 21.

filled three; we were delighted to see how much exciting work was still happening in medieval studies and queer studies. It was also somewhat surprising: many of the traditional venues which had given space to the explorations of queer theory in medieval studies had ceased to exist – imprints at Chicago and Duke University Presses had shuttered – and we both wondered, before the Sewanee call for papers, if we had seen the eclipse of much of this queer work.

We can boldly say that the answer to that question is no. This collection is part of a long and continuing resurgence of intersections between queer theory and medieval studies. This collection, in particular, explores the contours of queerness in medieval texts, written, copied, or read in England and France in the early, high, and late Middle Ages. Moving from Latin materials to French and finally English materials, these essays all ask, in different ways, what medieval queerness looks like, and who and what is interpolated by the “medieval queer.”

The Medieval Queer: What, When, How?

What is queer theory? Defining queer theory might in fact prove impossible. Indeed, the fact that, in spite of its various different formulations, queer theory has managed to elude one master definition is a feature, not a bug of the scholarly practices of the queer theorist. It is precisely the body of theoretical tools that proves to be indefinable, because queer theory doesn't seek one *telos*. Indeed, instead queer theorists have been interested in disparate, even contradictory, foci, including the perils of reprofuturity, temporality, sexuality (queer theory can and does exist without sex), or as a critique of traditional gender, race, or class structures. It has, at points, been all these things. And, in spite of its commonalities with other theoretical tools, among which one might count Marxist, deconstruction, or feminist critiques, queer theory is different. As Elizabeth Freeman makes clear, “what makes queer theory *queer* as opposed to simply deconstructionist is also its insistence on risking a certain vulgar referentiality, its understanding of the sexual encounter as precisely the body and ego's undoing.”³

When is queer theory? Queer theory, from its inception in the early 1990s till today, has been obsessed with its future, even as the denial of that futurity is a characteristic of much of the work which laid the groundwork for the

³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

theory's practice. Inevitably, as it borrowed much from then-contemporary feminisms, and because queer theory was wedded to social movements which saw greater promise in the destruction of then-contemporary oppression, queer theory has always been about the future:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there.⁴

Jose Esteban Muñoz's evocative description – not definition – of queerness is especially helpful. He discusses what belongs to queerness – the future – and what queer is not. But his terms for defining queerness remain, programmatically, elusive. What Muñoz doesn't mention is the past: the future belongs to queerness, the present to the prison, and the past, well, it is erased, unvoiced, unarticulated.

In fact, queer theorists have been largely consumed by the conception of queer's future and the foreclosure of a non-queer present; much work remains to be done, not only on the past of queerness but the queerness of the past and the foundations of queer theory. As Annamarie Jagose writes:

Queer, then, is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself. It maintains its critique of identity-focused movements by understanding that even the formation of its own coalitional and negotiated constituencies may well result in exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended.⁵

This volume features essays firmly tied to the specific historical circumstances of the texts they discuss. Nevertheless, the charge against anachronism is an old one. It is, however, odd that this question has to be answered *ad infinitum*, but similar questions about stemma and editorial theory, or uses of scientific terms and concepts coined long after 1550 do not need justification. Queer theorists, and those medievalists using queer theory, ultimately understand that they are working with texts and ideas that trouble a regiment of minutes, hours, days, months, and years which is constructed and partially contrived.

⁴ Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 131.

And our understanding of the medieval past's queerness, even if partial and hazy, also helps to bring into focus the blurriness of our queer present, and to give us tools to anticipate the futurity of queerness.

John Boswell, writing in 1980, indicates this historical slipperiness of desire and sexuality:

Therefore, "gay" has been contrasted in the study with "nongay," an expression which may startle some readers but which is no less justifiable than "non-Jewish," "non-Catholic," "non German," or "non-" anything else which comprises the focus of attention. This terminology has advantages beyond semantic precision. The word "homosexual" implicitly suggests that the primary distinguishing characteristic of gay people is their sexuality. There does not seem to be any evidence that gay people are any more or less sexual than others, and from the historian's point of view, tacitly suggesting such a thing is unwarranted. "Gay" allows the reader to draw his own conclusions about the relative importance of love, affection, devotion, romance, eroticism, or overt sexuality in the lives of the persons so designated. Sexual interest and expression vary dramatically in the human population, and a person's sexual interest may be slight without precluding the realization that he or she is attracted to persons of the same gender and hence distinct in some way from the majority.⁶

Although almost forty years old, this passage from *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* outlines some of the energies that prompted this volume (and book series). Writing past and beyond charges of anachronism, Boswell pinpoints what is still so relevant about the search for nonnormative identities in the medieval past. What Boswell and his book suggest is that the contours of this reclamation of a queer past (we have moved personally as scholars from "gay" to "queer") are ongoing – the future of the queer might be the discovery of that identity, and everything associated with it, in the past.

As Eve Sedgwick writes in "Queer and Now," "I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representations in where they must be smuggled, and with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged."⁷ Scholars have taken up Boswell and Sedgwick *frontally* in

⁶ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 45.

⁷ Eve Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1–20 at 3.

extending explorations of the queer in the Middle Ages. Carolyn Dinshaw comments that “queer histories are made of affective relations” and “one thing that makes this history queer is its view that sex is heterogeneous and indeterminate – not the view that we can never know what really happened sexually in past cultures because their immediacy is lost, but the view that sex . . . is at least in part contingent on systems of representation, and, as such, is fissured and contradictory.”⁸ As was mentioned earlier in this essay, queer theory is resistant to easy definitions; some scholars have imported modern terminology into the past to argue that there have always been queer people. We would agree, though, that those categories are not equally mapped onto historical identities which, in fact, offer up even richer possibilities for the history of queer identities.

Other scholars resist using modern terminology. For example, Karma Lochrie’s *Heterosyncracies* (2005) dismantles the idea that modern heteronormativity can be found in the medieval past and asks us to consider the ways in which Nature, which often engenders the unnatural, affects the discourse defining (female) sexuality. Lochrie writes, “It is possible, I want to argue, to imagine a pre-heteronormative past that is neither hopelessly utopian nor inveterately heteronormative, and furthermore that such a project calls us ineluctably to our present – to our assumptions about what we know and to the medieval residues that must now be accounted for in the way we will imagine sexualities in the future.”⁹ As well, Tison Pugh points out that “the Western Medieval world lacked a hermeneutic sense of homosexuality *contra* homosexuality as a defining feature of an individual’s identity, yet this predominantly Christian culture faced continuous struggles in defining the proper role of love and eroticism for its people.”¹⁰

Not Quite Gay, Beyond Gay

One of the assertions that these essays make is that the figure of the medieval queer – as person, identity, and affect – both echoes and anticipates a move past traditional binaries of nonnormative sexuality. In the first section, “Queer Latinities: Authorizing Same-Sex Desire,” Michael Johnson and Will Rogers

⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 12.

⁹ Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁰ Tison Pugh, *Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 5.

explore a history of queer figures in Latin texts of the high Middle Ages and treat texts and ideas that find queer renaissances in then-contemporary and subsequent French and English literatures. Introducing the grammatical disagreements about sexuality, queerness, and language in Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae*, a text that serves as the focus of Michael Johnson's "Sexual Ethics in the Medieval Grammar Classroom," Johnson asks how grammar education in the medieval classroom might have shaped erotic desire and the framing of queerness and language. In his wide-ranging, yet focused essay, Johnson examines the enlarging role of classroom education, the increasing autonomy of teachers of grammar, and the often-slippery status of grammar, both as moralizing power and subversive force. Johnson's essay begins with a discussion of *Altercatio Ganymedis et Helene*, interrogating the text's use of pagan materials and the lessons those sources impart, before fleshing out a comparison of certain grammatical treatises and treatments, among which Lille's *De planctu* looms large. Will Rogers's handling of Helen and Ganymede and the dream vision that depicts their debate necessarily follows Johnson's handling of the productive spaces where sexuality, grammar, and education collide. In "Failed Orientations: The Spaces of Sexual Histories and Failures," Rogers fleshes out the intersections of space and orientation in the twelfth-century poem *Altercatio Ganymedis et Helene*. In the debate between Ganymede and Helen, he addresses the poem's handling of what Jack Halberstam has termed "queer failure," as the Dreamer positions Ganymede against Helen. While the poem arguably ends in success and marriage, its unraveling of traditional gender structures and concentration on deviant figures (Ganymede, Helen) challenge medieval heteronormativity, orienting its reader to the prehistories of deviation that undergird feminist critique and queer theory, while also fleshing out the queer time and spaces of Ganymede in relation to Helen.

In the second section, "French Kisses: Queer Romance," Joseph Derosier, Lynn Shuttters, and Maud McInerney engage with the figure of the queer in medieval French literature, tracing how vernacular treatments of queerness both build upon and move away from the authorizing power of the Latin queer figure. Derosier's "Guillaume de Lorris's Unmaking of the Self: The Dreamer's Queer Failures" concentrates on the figure of Narcissus in the first portion of *Le roman de la Rose*, highlighting again the influence of Alan of Lille's *De planctu* and suggesting that Guillaume's text forecloses any kind of completion or success in interpretation or reading. By tying the reader to the figure of Narcissus, Derosier posits that not only does the reader see themselves in this text, but that that identification is necessarily a queer one. In tracing Guillaume's revision of Narcissus, Derosier asks provocatively, what does it mean for identity and interpretation not to really see Narcissus? This reliance on self-identification with queerness, which

is nevertheless not really *seen*, is central to Shutters's "Sodom, Bretons, and Ill-Defined Borders: Questing for Queerness with the *Knight of the Tower*." Her essay seeks to examine an apparently heteronormative conduct manual, one which is invested in regulating the proto-heterosexual household, which nevertheless imagines in the over-determined regulation and promotion of this household the possibility of failure and the specter of Sodom (and sodomy). Thus, while Shutters is clear that the queer might be a ghostly presence for this conduct manual, it is one which is visualized by the male narrator and constructed for and about women, especially in his discussion of the sins of Lot's wife. According to Shutters, this association not only links wayward female desire to nonnormative feelings but also demonstrates the ambivalence of the narrator to discourses of *fin amor*. Shutters's emphases on both queerness and time, in particular Elizabeth Freeman's "chromonormativity," connects her investigation of conduct manuals to the conduct of classical heroes in "Queer Time for Heroes in the *Roman d'Enéas* and the *Roman de Troie*." There, Maud McInerney discusses how characters who live outside the normative frames of courtly love – procreation and land acquisition effected through proto-heterosexual coupling – experience time not as Bakhtin theorizes "romance time" but as a kind of failed temporality. These heroes, who exist outside economies of procreation, find themselves in moments of "stasis, interruption, excess, and death," a temporal frame that McInerney productively links to the AIDS crisis and the wasting of time and bodies in another war-like landscape, as gay men seemed to exist outside a heteronormative timeframe.

In "Insular Queerness: English and the Nonnormative," the third and final section, Meg Cotter-Lynch, Micah Goodrich, and Haylie Swenson examine how the medieval queer is fleshed out in Old and Middle English. Meg Cotter-Lynch's "The Gender Genealogy of St. Mary of Egypt" returns to the focus of the first few essays in the collection, as she ties gender to grammar in order to flesh out the relationship among sanctity, gender, and sexuality. By examining the grammatical and semantic markers that establish the often-obscure or unclear gender and sex of St. Mary of Egypt in both its Old English version and probable Latin source, Cotter-Lynch's essay seeks to see St. Mary as genderqueer, freeing both her and us from seeing sexuality and gender as inextricably tied. Zooming in on bodies which prove hard to characterize, Micah Goodrich's essay, "Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones: Chaucer's Queer Cavities," focuses on the bodies and bags, holes and cavities, of the Pardoner and the Summoner. Goodrich's essay not only sees in the various purses, wallets, and bags carried by the Pardoner a series of cavities where queer reproduction can occur, but also sees the bodies of various pilgrims as purses and containers themselves. Tying together these material and corporeal spaces, Goodrich investigates how value and absence are

queered by social exchanges, processes which, in Goodrich's words, "uncover how the medieval queer is assembled, reassembled, and interchanged among a social collective." Finally, Haylie Swenson, in "Resisting Sex and Species in the *Squire's Tale*," examines how the *Tale's* animals – both the falcon who complains of her sadness to Canacee and the magical, yet seemingly crafted, horse – push at the boundaries of chivalric spaces. Swenson's essay subverts the order in which the animals appear in the tale, moving from the falcon's description and interactions with Canacee to the promise of the marvelous horse. In their interactions with the humans who surround them, these animals exhibit a slipperiness in the space between human and animal, "in the process creating space for both interspecies and intrasexual relationships of care outside of the gendered human norms of chivalric romance."

Finally, "Epilogue: Opening Up Queerness" is a closing gesture, and an invitation for future paths in queer medievalism. Michelle M. Sauer's "Queer Time and Lesbian Temporality in Medieval Women's Encounters with the Side Wound" builds on contemporary ideas of queer time, showing how a certain lesbian potentiality resides in medieval depictions of Christ's side wound.

These essays are a testament to the capacious qualities of queerness in the Middle Ages. Singularly they point to the local and contingent medieval queer – embodied, open, multivalent, powerful. Together, as a *richness*, these essays point to a queer medieval future, one in which the past is never finished with us, new bonds are formed in surprising ways, and knowledge is shared in the spirit of love, visibility, and affirmation.

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