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## Chapter 2

# Failed Orientations: The Spaces of Sexual Histories and Failures

The twelfth-century dream vision *Altercatio Ganymedis et Helene*, or *Ganymede and Helen*, depicts a debate between Helen who is in love with Ganymede, who seems uninterested in a female lover. These cross-purposes – Helen in love, Ganymede without interest – introduce a debate: whom do men want? The answer is given through images of disgust which Helen and Ganymede use to debate each other, and these images – the very center of the *Ganymede and Helen* – nevertheless lead to their marriage at the end. This debate, voiced in this dream space, almost seems prophetic – the objects of men’s desire find themselves reoriented toward each other and the marriage seems an abrupt, if fitting end. While the marriage orients the poem toward what is normative, this poetic dream space with its debate centered around disgusting images of the body and sex and twisting of time and knowledge maintains a core of queerness that cannot be fully erased and a failure of Ganymede and Helen that must be explained.

Contextualizing the poem by way of Jack Halberstam’s “queer art of failure” offers the opportunity to view some of the ways *Ganymede and Helen* anticipates and voices queerness. The queer art of failure is not simply losing or defeat, but the articulation of a different relationship to identity and success, even a kind of style or way of existing. In this way, failure might be decoupled from success and made into a queer term, where “under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the revision of Ganymede and Helen as interlocutors before they wed each other, the poet shows how their failures – Helen’s inability to see the sodomite, Ganymede’s failure to win the debate – animate the tensions between Helen and Ganymede in the poem. We might first look at the end of the poem, seeing in Ganymede’s failure to act normatively as a “man” the kind of “queer failure” that opens up new opportunities for identity for the cupbearer of Zeus. Even further, the failure of both Helen and Ganymede to recognize each other as somehow

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

other than expected – Helen as dominant, Ganymede as submissive – presents a chance to revise and review these characters before and beyond their marriage and the loss of their subversive characters. These more “surprising ways of being in the world” are ones where these two figures are centered not as objects of rapacious desires but as interlocutors who claim poetic space and authority through their frank speech and revel in their orientations toward those who desire them. Their marriage, perhaps meant to close this debate and excise what is queer about their interactions, itself fails to save the Dreamer who sees them quarrel and then wed. The poet’s ending repentance is full of potential for sins which might have been committed or which might yet occur.

For this essay, which builds on this notion of queer art of failure, I want to think about the number of ways this poem might queer itself, and anticipate important directions in queer theory, including considerations on space and orientation, what Sara Ahmed calls “queer phenomenology,” and examinations of time and history, building on Elizabeth Freeman’s explorations of “chrononormativity,” “erotohistoriography,” and “temporal drag,” as well as Heather Love’s “feeling backward.” All three of these queer approaches – failure, orientation, history – seem bound up in the figure of Ganymede in the poem, pointing to the numerous ways the poem looks at the queer and we might look at the poem.<sup>2</sup> Together with failure, these categories of queer study build upon each other in this poem, suggesting that this medieval work serves as a test case for locating what is queer, across time, in both medieval and postmedieval materials. Indeed, failure is implicitly central to Ahmed’s, Freeman’s, and Love’s discussion of space/orientation, time, and history, respectively (if one can even separate these three concepts). For Ahmed, calling queer a sexual orientation recalls the word’s etymology – as a kind of twisting – and that identity’s spatial relations. One is queer *in relation* to what is not queer, what is straight, itself a word and condition which recalls a point in space – not twisted but direct between two points. As a reflection of space, straight too encapsulates ease and the absence of pain – the shortest way between two points, two identities, two lovers is a straight line, in other words. To be queer is to feel the burden of space and distance. For Freeman and Love the study of queer pasts and queer histories is necessarily one which suggests something like failure – Freeman notes there might be something pleasurable in being out of time – her “temporal drag” complicates some of the narratives of progress that a larger term like

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<sup>2</sup> This approach is borrowed somewhat from Masha Raskolnikov’s reading of the *Clerk’s Tale*, itself guided by Wallace Steven’s “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” which she presented at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Sewanee Medieval Colloquium at the University of the South in 2017.

“queer” might suggest, as the nostalgia for identities of the past pulls subjects back to them. But for Love, the pleasure might be found in what is painful, as negative affects and the erasure of queer history can motivate political progress in the present. These citations of modern queer theory and their usefulness in interpretations of *Ganymede and Helen* also show just how modern the poem can be, a characteristic that I further emphasize through the poem’s comparison to *Angels in America*, a play that has been the subject of medievalist inquiry for a few decades. Together these theories and play might open up the past in order to begin reading the future of the queer past in *Ganymede and Helen*.<sup>3</sup>

But before I discuss the present and the future, a turn to the past is helpful. Perhaps little known today, *Ganymede and Helen* does offer productive connections with other discussions of premodern queerness and examinations of the normative in language and sexuality. Whether the poem maintains any space for queerness in its ultimate condemnation of homosexuality is itself debatable, it does certainly feature in debates on the effect of sodomy on language, reproduction, and nature. Indeed, many examinations of the poem center on its relation to Alan of Lille’s *Plaint of Nature* where Ganymede appears too in a rebuttal of the exchange between Nature and the Dreamer, a scene that is instructive for reading Ganymede in *Ganymede and Helen*. In responding to Nature’s claims about the “strange and profane language” she must use to describe the unnaturalness fleshed out by poets, the Dreamer responds

I wonder why, when you consider the statements of the poets, you load the strings of the above attacks against the contagions of the human race alone, although we read that the gods, too, have limped around the same circle of aberration. For Jupiter, translating the Phrygian youth to the realms above, transferred there a proportionate love for him on his transference. The one he had made his wine-master by day he made his subject in bed by night.<sup>4</sup>

This sole direct reference to Ganymede in *Plaint* suggests a number of ideas not only about Ganymede’s larger depictions but also about the similarities between *Plaint* and *Ganymede and Helen* which demand some attention here.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Benilde Montgomery, “*Angels in America* as Medieval Mystery,” *Modern Drama* 4 (1998): 596–606. Montgomery also notes the critical response to the play, especially from queer theorists such as Leo Bersani (596). Also of interest is Steven F. Kruger’s “Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 151–71.

<sup>4</sup> Alan of Lille, *Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 137–39.

Ganymede is the Dreamer's response to Nature's condemnation of poetic treatments of sodomy and the unnatural, one which, while not an excuse for human sodomy, seems to use the divine sins of Jupiter to mitigate the force of Nature's critique against human sin. In this somewhat ambiguous condemnation the Dreamer is necessarily calling attention to the rape and abduction of Ganymede, a story whose ubiquity is signaled by the lack of any direct naming for Ganymede, other than the Phrygian youth. And like Helen in *Ganymede and Helen*, Nature echoes (if one takes an earlier date for *Ganymede and Helen* and a later one for *Plaint*) Helen's apparently contrived reluctance to speak in terms that are graphic.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, like Nature, Helen worries that "I don't know which way to turn, for if I do not speak on a par with the vicious,/ I shall be called the loser."<sup>6</sup> For both *Ganymede and Helen* and *Plaint*, language and sexuality seem connected in their construction as either normative and natural or nonnormative.

These connections between *Ganymede and Helen* and *Plaint* certainly help frame how Ganymede might be a repository for nonnormative sexuality and its effects on nature and language. Like *Ganymede and Helen*, *Plaint* emphasizes some aspects of Ganymede's nonnormative identity clearly although Alan of Lille more forcefully condemns the same-sex activities embodied by Ganymede, even if the Dreamer attempts to halfheartedly debate the culpability for sodomy. Nevertheless, the ties between the two dream visions are made apparent in Ganymede, who enjoys a robust afterlife in the Christian Middle Ages. Indeed, Ganymede, as V. A. Kolve shows, has an afterlife in the high Middle Ages during which Zeus's cupbearer is often a symbol for other kinds of attachments beyond queer desire, even as that queerness inheres

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5 Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 91. Arguing for an earlier date for *Ganymede and Helen* (*Altercatio*), Newman suggests that *Plaint* echoes *Ganymede and Helen*.

6 *Ganymede and Helen*, 201–2. For a translation of *Altercatio Ganimedidis et Helene*, see John Boswell's *Ganymede and Helen*, 381–89. For this essay, I have cited this edition by line number and Boswell's title, while nevertheless consulting Rolf Lenzen's critical edition of the Latin manuscripts in "Altercatio Ganimedidis et Helene': Kritische Edition mit Kommentar," *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 7 (1972): 161–86. Boswell's edition is based primarily on Lenzen's text but, according to his footnote (on 381), he nevertheless consulted a manuscript (Houghton Library MS Lat. 198) at Harvard University for his translation. Thomas Stehling's translation, printed in *Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship*, trans. Stehling (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985) was also consulted but not used or cited in the essay. I have checked Lenzen's Latin edition against Boswell's translation.

nevertheless. Kolve's "Ganymede/*Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire*" traces

a late-twelfth-century St. Nicholas play called *Filius Getronis* (*The Son of Getron*) that has been little studied, and never in this context. I want to set it against the anxiety occasioned in medieval monasteries concerning same-sex desire, especially across generations, between men and youths or boys, and the ways in which the monastic community sought to control such desire and rechannel it into acceptable forms. My subject is not man/boy love in the modern criminalized sense of that term, but rather the ways in which medieval monasticism acknowledged the possibility of such emotion, sometimes (as in this play) allowed it an unusual degree of dignity, and urgently sought viable forms for its transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

In Kolve's wide-ranging article, one can see why Ganymede becomes a flashpoint, if you will, for affections and desires that might map onto Ganymede's own mythological story, especially in monastic contexts. Novices and monks in a community could model, problematically, the kinds of dynamics of abduction and servitude which the ancient myths centered on Ganymede depict. In the space of such highly charged homosocial spaces, where intergenerational bonds might be formed between monastic figures, the echoes of Ganymede have the power, according to Kolve, to redirect these homosocial, and homoerotic, elements to paper over the troublesome desires which these spaces almost certainly produced.<sup>8</sup> And while the author of the poem cannot be known with any certainty – Boswell mentions evidence of an author from southern France – the material, like many of the other expressions of same-sex love from the high Middle Ages that Boswell includes in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (*CSTH*) is certainly legible in a monastic context.<sup>9</sup>

So while at first glance it does seem odd to include this poem as any indication of premodern queer identity, for its apparent condemnation of sodomy and same-sex desire, it is a rich source for fleshing out what premodern queerness means. This short Latin dialogue, with its 270 lines, nevertheless reflects much of the critical discourse surrounding sodomy, pederasty, and the role of passivity in

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7 V. A. Kolve, "Ganymede/*Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire*," *Speculum* 73.4 (1998): 1014–67 at 1018.

8 See also Mathew Kuefler, "Male Friendship and the Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France," in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 179–212. In discussing some of the afterlives of Ganymede, although not his main focus, Kuefler asserts the "image of Jove and Ganymede [in *Roman d'Énéas*] itself depends on the parallels between the mythical rapture of the adolescent male by an adult male for domestic and sexual service and the contemporary 'theft' of boys into military household as foster-sons" (189).

9 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), 258.

the twelfth century. And, according to John Boswell in *CSTH*, while short the poem is remarkable, for many reasons. “Modern scholarship has largely ignored this poem, but it was extremely popular in the Middle Ages: it survives wholly or in part in manuscripts all over Europe, from Italy to England, and it was recited aloud to students and known by heart by many educated persons. Its influence on subsequent literature was profound.”<sup>10</sup> The extant manuscripts seem to demonstrate the reach of this particular text, and the poem’s echoes in similar poems, many of which Boswell includes in *CSTH*, speak to Ganymede’s versatility as a symbol for same-sex love and premodern queerness.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the poem also serves to encapsulate both the desire for a queer past and the difficulties in finding it. Rather than reproduction and the energies of marriage that consume the end of the poem couched in the citation of Nature’s creations and future considerations, the poem implicitly gives voice to concerns for those who desire a queer past, a past which we might try to recover. According to Heather Love, that

effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins, to bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead. Bad enough if you want to tell the story of a conquering race, but to remember history’s losers is worse, for the loss that swallows the dead absorbs these others into even more profound obscurity. The difficulty of not reaching the dead will not keep us from trying.<sup>12</sup>

The motif of loss here is different from Halberstam’s formulation, of course. Love is speaking to the destruction of the histories, mythologies, and narratives of those who have been conquered, but in her promise here we might see glimpses of Halberstam’s queer failures. In Love’s queer historiography, the absence or loss of traditional evidence gives rise to desire to see, and implicitly I think the ability to see beyond what counts as traditional evidence and record. Likewise, for *Ganymede and Helen*, if Ganymede does lose to Helen in the poem’s debate, it is that loss that will recover some of what is gone. For the poem, losing offers both a challenge to the enforced productivity of proto-heterosexual logic and an anticipation of queer historiography, reading in the gaps and filling in lost desires from the past.

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<sup>10</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 255–56.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Boswell’s inclusion of “Ganymede and Hebe” (392–400) and “Ganymede” (401) in *CSTH*.

<sup>12</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 21.

In thinking through how this queer historiography is connected to “queer failure,” we might return to Halberstam and see how Love’s characterization of history’s losers above connects to failure as style. According to Halberstam,

Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers, failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.”<sup>13</sup>

What I suggest *Ganymede*, as a figure, and as a figure in the *Ganymede and Helen*, might show is just how we can map the queer, with respect to time, desire, and failure, and to see, again, the similarities to and differences from queers, medieval and postmedieval. The use of Halberstam’s theoretical framework – which builds upon animated movies and CGI creations – might be met with multiple objections here. *Ganymede and Helen* is no trifle, it seems, no silly *tour de force* centered on animated beings, but it was popular, and, like the animated works Halberstam tracks, uses fictive beings to hint at somewhat eternal or moral truths. These popular works might hide their subversive critiques, as the comparison between *Ganymede and Helen* and *Angels in America* demonstrates.

## Ganymede in Heaven: *Angels in America*

As a Latin poem that survives in a number of manuscripts, *Ganymede and Helen* seems to celebrate the normative in a somewhat authoritative context. In order to trace how *Ganymede and Helen* maintains queerness in this authoritative context and to flesh out the medieval poem’s handling of queer time and space, all while making sense of the failure of Ganymede to win the debate, I am drawn first to *Angels in America*. *Angels in America* is a text where this union of normative and nonnormative echoes and whose treatment of queerness is likewise ambiguous: as a meditation on AIDS, homosexuality, and religion in the late twentieth century, the play makes clear how the narrative of *Ganymede and Helen* moves – how a figure of queerness (Ganymede) and spurned woman (Helen) eventually become husband and wife, a relationship that, in its development, reflects two separate moments in *Angels in America*. The debate between Helen and Ganymede is enlivened and its revelatory power exposed set alongside Prior’s first meeting with Harper, the wife of a closeted Mormon, in a dream-like space. This space reveals Prior’s homosexuality and

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<sup>13</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 1.

centers on his bodily infirmity, a moment that implicitly rehearses the homophobic attack Helen uses against Ganymede. While Harper and Prior discuss, Helen and Ganymede debate in their *altercatio*, as Helen emphasizes Ganymede's obsession with youth:

“Tell me, youth, when youthful good looks change,  
When you grow a beard, when your face gets wrinkles,  
When your chest turns bushy, when your hole grows tough,  
What anxious stud will dream of you then?”<sup>14</sup>

Helen's provocative question – which anxious stud will dream of Ganymede once he is no longer young, when age has made him mature, even old? – anticipates, first, some of the interactions between Harper and Prior and then an argument – even *altercation* – between Harper and her husband, Joe. Compare for example *Angel's* example of another coming out in a dream space:

Prior: Something surprising.  
Harper: Yes.  
Prior: Your husband's a homo.<sup>15</sup>

This brief dialogue offers the first glimpse of the unraveling of Harper's marriage to Joe, the chiseled Mormon lawyer, a closeted gay man whose appearance suggests something of the embodiment of Reagan's America, defined by its whiteness, compulsory heterosexuality, and lack of sickness or impairment. While Prior reveals what surely Harper already suspects, the dream space of the play in large part undoes the totality of the fiction of her marriage and Joe's orientation. Indeed, in the “threshold of revelation,” the liminal space of their shared hallucination, Harper reveals the extent of Prior's illness and suffering from AIDS and his inner freedom from the ravages of the disease – the human cost of which now seems almost incalculable and somewhat obscured by mainstream appeal and success of the play. And likewise, in *Ganymede and Helen*, the dream space where the Dreamer first sees Helen and Ganymede offers a threshold of revelation for these two mythological figures, where they both first misrecognize each other and then debate their relative worth to men. Even so, this space erases some of their earlier literary contexts: there are no direct connections between this Ganymede and that of mythology, where Ganymede is

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<sup>14</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 177–80.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Revised and Complete Edition 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2013), 33.

often presented as the cupbearer for Zeus.<sup>16</sup> While the source of Helen or Ganymede cannot be known with any certainty in this poem, there are, especially concerning Helen, signal differences from the Homeric tradition and the depiction of Helen from Ovid's *Heroides*, even as there are similarities. Menelaus is not present nor is Paris, even as her condemnations of Ganymede strike a similar moral tone to her condemnations of Paris in *Heroides*.<sup>17</sup>

The absence of Helen's husband and her lover, and the intimacy she desires to enjoy with Ganymede, along with her surprise and disgust at the unveiling of Ganymede as a lover of sodomy, are striking when read alongside Harper and Prior. Indeed, the collapse of Harper's marriage in her hallucination which follows her surprise seems to echo Helen's own surprise of Ganymede's submissive sexual behavior. Harper articulates the mutual disgust Joe and she feel toward each other, especially in the bedroom, giving something of a conclusion to what *might* have happened in the poem's ending marriage between Helen and Ganymede:

Yes, I'm the enemy. That's easy. That doesn't change. You think you're the only one who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces. It's like a punishment. It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you. . . . It's a sin, and it's killing us both.<sup>18</sup>

The "it" here, that thing between them, is the unspeakable for both characters, for the majority of the play, until Harper asks Joe if he's a "homo." Absolutely erased, absolutely highlighted, Joe's homosexuality becomes the excuse for this failure of heterosexual pleasure and reproduction. It is a moment that seems absolutely modern: the thirty-something couple, pulled apart by religion and identity in a 1980s New York riven by a "gay plague." Indeed, it's a queer place to be: writing about a twelfth-century monastic text with reference to a modern American play. As many have noted, the play itself has been and continues to be a success and it is wise to question its queer potentiality and its place in an essay that opens a volume on new views of historicized queerness.<sup>19</sup>

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**16** For a discussion of Ganymede's abduction, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk X:143–219.

**17** Ovid's *Heroides* 17 characterizes Helen as outraged at Paris's acts and as faithful to her husband. For a discussion of Ovid's influence and readership in the Middle Ages, see Marilyn Desmond, "Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and the Wounds of Love," in her *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 35–54 but especially 53–54.

**18** Kushner, *Angels in America*, 37.

**19** In particular, Montgomery's "Angels in America as Medieval Mystery" cites David Savran's critique of the play's ambivalent critique, even support, of Reagan's politics. I am indebted to one of the reader's suggestions to view this play and its inclusion here with suspicion.

But the seemingly hegemonic success of the play and its handling of sodomy, same-sex attraction and the interplay between normative and nonnormative sexuality positions the play as somewhat of an ideal entry into *Ganymede and Helen*, with the medieval poem's debate between Helen and Ganymede, following Ganymede's submission to Helen, and their competition for male attention.

## Nature's Failures?

The very structure of *Ganymede and Helen* calls attention to the structural failure of a kind of proto-heterosexuality to contain what is queer. Indeed, one of the signal ways the poem registers the failure of its ending is in the framing of its debate – not just in the actual framing and orientation of Helen's and Ganymede's bodies but also in the contextualization of the poem as one extolling nature and Nature personified. Indeed, as Barbara Newman has argued,

these excerpts from the “Altercatio” suggest the general tenor of debates about homosexuality in the later twelfth century. Appeals to animal behavior could backfire, as Helen discovers. Most animals are obviously not monogamous, but more to the point, there was no other ethical context in which clerics taught that rational humans should imitate irrational beasts. Boswell has shown that two contradictory ideas about “natural sexuality” seem to have taken hold among writers at about the same time: first, the notion that certain creatures – such as the hare, the hyena, and the weasel – were “innately” homosexual and therefore to be shunned, and second, the belief that homosexuality is “unnatural” because it does not occur at all among animals. Alan of Lille alludes to both ideas in *De planctu*.<sup>20</sup>

The poem ends, as one supposes it must, with the union of Ganymede and Helen. This ending and its celebratory tone of proto-heterosexual marriage is anything but a victory, at least for Ganymede. Ganymede loses both the debate and his desires. Then, it is clear that if the twelfth-century dream vision is an effort at supporting a kind of premodern heterosexuality and reproductive futurity, it fails completely. Ganymede, whose passivity disgusts Helen, is still conquered by Helen at the end of the poem, and merely becomes her bottom. Even if that failure can be overlooked and their marriage celebrated, then the final ending of the dream vision, too, hints at failure. I would suggest just as “the apparent victory of Helen should be viewed cautiously,” so then should the Dreamer's ending repentance.<sup>21</sup> The Dreamer awakes to find whatever solutions are available to Ganymede for nonnormative desire are not available to him. If

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<sup>20</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 258.

a monastic author, then in his homosocial environment there is no room for marriage. If not, failure seems perpetual, as the potential for sodomy seems eternal in his ending repentance. In light of these layers of failure, how might failure actually be reinterpreted? How does failure actually become a way to interrogate and criticize those structures which render Ganymede a loser? In the lines that describe Ganymede's loss, Ganymede's submissive nature in fact remains, even as he seems to change and become a figure of normative sexuality:

He is silent. Reason rises to speak.  
 She prudently limits herself to a few words:  
 "There is no need of a judge," she says, "the matter speaks for itself.  
 "I say to the boy, enough. The boy is conquered."<sup>22</sup>

The reclamation of Ganymede for marriage, for the active role, suggests a kind of ambiguity that rewrites time, space, and victory in ambivalent ways. Even losing, Ganymede's position, voice, and history are articulated in the poem, and the poet's descriptions of all three suggest a rather hollow victory for Helen and heterosexuality. Indeed, the debate between Ganymede and Helen probably best exemplifies what might be read as ambivalence on the subject of homosexuality. The poet makes Ganymede lose the debate, and at the poem's conclusion abjures homosexual acts: "Let the Sodomites blush, the Gomorrhans weep/ Let everyone guilty of this deed repent."<sup>23</sup> His poem *eventually* stands as a condemnation of homosexuality, even as the poem's structure gives equal time to arguments on both sides of the question, and in the body of the debate the poet lets both Ganymede and Helen "score points."<sup>24</sup> If anything, Ganymede gets lines that are more repulsive and wounding to Helen. He describes her vagina and those of other women as "a yawning cave" and a "sticky bush" and as a "hole whose stink is worse than anything else in the world."<sup>25</sup> These insults are given in response to Helen's claim that

Your Venus is sterile and fruitless,  
 And highly injurious to womankind.  
 When a male mounts a male in so reprobate a fashion,  
 A monstrous Venus imitates a woman.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 251–54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 268–69. Boswell's note in *CSTH* following these lines (389) is instructive, as he notes they are part of an expanded ending, found only in the Houghton manuscript.

<sup>24</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 258–59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 230–31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 225–28.

Helen's weapon, of course, is Ganymede's ejaculate – the “tear of Venus between your thighs” – and he is silenced.<sup>27</sup> Echoing or anticipating Alan of Lille's dream vision (Michael Johnson's essay in this collection touches more on the relationship between the two poems), these lines seem to match those of Nature personified in the *Plaint of Nature*. The poem begins with radical sameness: both Helen and Ganymede are touched by the divine in their appearance, and even Ganymede misrecognizes Helen, and this perceived sameness hints at the sterility and waste of Ganymede's ejaculate later in the poem. Difference is necessary to avoid this “monstrous Venus.” But as a boy and a woman, sitting alone in a field, they begin to debate – the poet/monk notes they talk of many subjects, but he gives voice to their competition. What do men want? Ganymede says it's him. Helen counters it's her. Indeed, it is the reliance on Nature, personified in the poem, and nature, as a space and place governed by a kind of reproductive time, that actually twists and opens a space for queerness. And yet, it is in this space of nature that the anxieties of queerness surface.<sup>28</sup> Far from seeing Nature as a strict moral authority, one which polices and regulates normative behavior, Nature and, by extension, what is natural contains vice and virtue. Indeed, as Joan Cadden has shown,

Nature was, in many respects, the source, judge, and enforcer of right living and proper social relations in the view of both academic and social elites in the late Middle Ages. It directed the production of desire and its regulation under the auspices of reason, both crucial to the psychological dynamics of virtue and the political dynamics of hierarchy. But, if natural desire and pleasure were necessary elements in the dialectic of moral goodness and perhaps also of justice, they were dangerous forces that necessarily subverted the orders they supported.<sup>29</sup>

Cadden's focus here – the tensions inherent in a system dominated by nature where nature's “fragility” and its “lapses” make virtue and vice possible – helps to clarify how the depiction of nature as the setting for *Ganymede and Helen* might highlight what the Dreamer and Helen eventually see: the figure of Ganymede is beautiful and perfect, even as he is an unrepentant sodomite. Nature's wild attributes and Ganymede's freedom to exist introduce how space might control, reflect, or create positions that are not normative. As Sara Ahmed makes clear, queerness

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<sup>27</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 244.

<sup>28</sup> William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Joan Cadden, “Trouble in the Earthly Paradise: The Regime of Nature in Late Medieval Christian Culture,” in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 207–31 at 208.

and its etymology make evident how space might be central not only to orientation but also to orientation of what is sexual:

We can turn to the etymology of the word “queer,” which comes from the Indo-European word “twist.” Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a “straight line,” a sexuality that is bent and crooked. . . . The spatiality of this term is not incidental. Sexuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces, but also in the sense that bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit that space.<sup>30</sup>

Ahmed here highlights the consequences of spaces, which in their layout can force bodies to twist and turn in order to fit, to exist. These spaces, then, seem to create or influence the orientation – strictly understood – of bodies. But this orientation, as Ahmed notes, goes further: the physical positioning of bodies creates sexual positions and positions of sexuality, connections that I explore next in linking Ahmed’s theories of spaces that queer to the spaces, places, and times of *Ganymede and Helen*.

*Ganymede and Helen* at first seems never queer in time or place: an encosium in many ways of the beauty and normativity of nature, it would seem to challenge any queer readings one might apply to the apparently timeless scenes of nature it depicts, both the poem’s framing of the Dreamer resting in spring or in the romantic scene of Helen and Ganymede which he sees in his sleepy state. The two settings for the poem – the grasses upon which the Dreamer lies, and the “summer grass beneath a lovely pine,” where Helen and Ganymede stand – are both spaces where desire blooms, often in wild and unrestrained ways.

The sun had entered the House of the Bull, and spring, blossom laden,  
Had reared its lovely, flowered head.  
Under an olive tree I lay, on a bed provided by the grass,  
Amusing myself by recalling the sweetness of love.<sup>31</sup>

The discussion here of the position of the Dreamer in time (on a bed of grass), in spring, and in the middle of a sort of astrological time (the so-called House of the Bull signals the ruling astrological sign is Taurus, so April and May) presents a time so deeply embedded in procreative love that even this Dreamer is swept away by the regimes of time here, but there are other regimes of time in the Middle Ages, such as monastic time and its scheduling. As I’ve argued above, Ganymede’s frequent appearance in the high medieval ages, especially in monastic or religious

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<sup>30</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 1–4.

materials, makes this poem legible in a monastic context, a claim that Kolve's examination of *Getron* implicitly supports. The poem might be considered within this experience of monastic time, which is regimented, prescribed, and regulated, just as surely as allegorical spring and the Zodiac signs regulate the seasons and the emotions and activities which they direct.<sup>32</sup>

And here, modes of procreative, natural time and monastic time don't seem that different from the modern rhythms of time that Elizabeth Freeman describes in *Time Binds*:

Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar-Zerubavel calls "hidden rhythms," forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege.<sup>33</sup>

It might seem odd to link this kind of modern regulation to medieval modes of time – sacred, natural, monastic. But what remains similar among all these modes, medieval and postmedieval, is the way in which, according to Freeman, "naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation" and this "binding is what turns mere existence into . . . *chrononormativity*, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in her fleshing out of how time binds, drags, or otherwise organizes modern life, especially queer life it seems, one might see in the Dreamer's desire "that it [the sight of spring] had never left [his] eyes," voiced at the beginning of the poem, a challenge to the regimes of time that unite the homosocial and sterile environment of the monastery with the regimes of time that Helen feels as she reaches out to Ganymede.<sup>35</sup> Before we

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<sup>32</sup> See J. D. North, "Monastic Time," in *The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 203–12 for a clear account of time and its accounting in religious communities in the Middle Ages. "The Jews had the custom of praying three times a day at the third, sixth and ninth hours, and the early Christians later extended that scheme, adding prayers at midnight (when Paul and Silas sang in prison) and at the beginning of day and night. It was St. Benedict himself who added a seventh hour of prayer, compline, so completing this rule of the Church for the times of prayer, although one that was subject to much local variation. I will not even try to explain how matins could move around, as one moved from place to place, how lauds was occasionally combined with it, how sext and none could be joined, or vespers with compline. The important thing is that the canonical hours mattered greatly, and that some means of deciding on the times of service was of crucial importance" (207).

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 8.

hear any of the words they exchange, the poet reports that Ganymede and Helen begin to debate and argue, as “the impudent youth compares himself to the female.”<sup>36</sup> One might wonder whether Helen actually notices because, following this description of their exchange, the poet describes Helen’s own rush to lust and love:

She, already longing for the male and ready for bed,  
Has for some time felt the proddings of love.  
The singular beauty of Ganymede inflames her,  
And already the warmth within proclaims itself without.<sup>37</sup>

These lines, and their connection to time and haste, signal a kind of anticipation of Freeman’s notions of how time binds – “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” But this haste and citation of time and waste – Helen kisses the boy when she is not asked and waits for no frivolous courtship – also returns to orientations and how space orients actual bodies into different orientations.

But before these lines quoted above, in view of the gods and goddesses, Helen and Ganymede relax and recline:

Both are stretched out upon the verdant grass,  
And might have been blessed with union,  
But Ganymede, not knowing the role expected of him,  
Presses himself against her as if he wishes to be passive.<sup>38</sup>

The two failed lovers are in the orientation of the Dreamer – reclining upon the verdant grass, and, like the Dreamer, both are oriented to ask for the impossible: Helen demands to submit; Ganymede presses his body into position, ready to be mounted. These spatial clues, following Ahmed’s lead, might be read as an implicit indictment of the fluidity of nature – here on the grass, in the very bed and foundation of nature, both ask not just for what is impossible but also for what is unnatural. It is no surprise, then, that we next see the would-be lovers come to the house of Nature, where they find Nature, along with Reason and Providence,

Ruminating over the secrets of things to come,  
Weaving thread into countless figures  
And creating things with precise scales and balances.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 21–24.

<sup>38</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 29–32.

<sup>39</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 46–48.

As created beings, Ganymede and Helen challenge the order and layout of this space – Nature, Reason, and Providence work together on creation and the future, handling each with care and precision, but it is precisely the dominant woman and the submissive man who upset the “precise scales and balances” of creation. And this is where part of the poem ends – the indirect reporting and the voice of the Dreamer. Following the introduction of the pair’s dilemma, Ganymede’s and Helen’s words take center stage, as the poem shifts from looking at the pair with a Dreamer describing their appearances to the direct speech of both Ganymede and Helen. It seems appropriate to think about the claims of history and the erasure of queerness that this trip to Nature appears to inaugurate. The invocation of the future in this distant, dreamy past offers a glimpse into the past, where the Dreamer and his readers can see and recuperate histories, present and lost, to find where silence might be read, where queer pasts meet feminist figures, and where exempla can be found to guide the present and future. Indeed, what this loss looks like is an orientation (something akin to an inclination) toward failure for both Ganymede and Helen. The submissive man and dominant woman, therefore, anticipate and enliven the very notion of alternate histories, partially erased, told from a queer or feminist perspective, as “queer and feminist histories are the histories of those who are willing to risk the consequences of deviation.”<sup>40</sup>

But who really loses? In the course of debating, Helen feels her desire come alive, and she longs – both with her body and mind – for Ganymede. Ganymede, shamed for his desires, asks for forgiveness, accepting the original advances of Helen. But, as Freeman’s notion of “temporal drag” implies, the pull of previous depictions, imagery, and convention cannot be erased here. Ganymede is a mythological figure known for having no choice or voice, and is abducted – raped would be more accurate – by Zeus as an eagle, and taken to Olympus. As this poem and its early articulations of queer space, time, and failure indicate, Ganymede reverts to an object of desire at the end, and Ganymede, as with *Angels’s* Joe, cannot hide his nonnormative desires, even in heterosexual marriage. Nor can the poem escape the drag of previous histories of Ganymede. This failure to make Ganymede straight, to change his orientation, is made clear in the poet’s discussion of Helen’s conquest of Ganymede in debate. Reinforcing his submissive orientation both in the poem and in mythology, and echoing how Ganymede approaches Helen as a dominant sexual partner at the opening of the poem, the apparent deletion of his queer desires makes them clear and present. In this way, the ending of the poem reflects the troublesome logic, or non-logic,

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<sup>40</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 91.

of sodomy and the fear of it: “[Sodomy] was nowhere, yet everywhere threatened society with destruction. It was blotted out of the annuals of the past, unrecorded in the present, forbidden to exist in the future.”<sup>41</sup>

As this poem and its early articulations of queer space, time, and failure indicate, Ganymede looks queerly at procreation, seeing the continuation of his face and person as a waste. Likewise, he looks queerly at Helen, whom he first sees implicitly as one of his “anxious studs.”<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously, he also looks queer to Helen and at Helen, that is, she first sees a potential partner rather than competition for men and he sees her at first in a similar fashion. And, finally, the Dreamer, the poet inside the poem and, arguably, the same poet outside, looks queer by the end – his ending and shame appear unavoidable. The poem ends with the “blessed union” which joins Ganymede to Helen, at Ganymede’s request, and, seemingly, Ganymede is the dominant figure, asking for Helen’s hand and their nuptials occur in the penultimate stanza. Here, at the end, I unsettle the supposedly harmonious end of the poem and instead concentrate on Ganymede’s failure to win the debate and Helen’s highlighting of his failure to procreate. How might these failures be coded as queer failure? Before marriage, after defeat, Ganymede is reminded of his ejaculation and his position, as a bottom, and this reminder anticipates that the dream functions similarly for the poet who remains, as he awakens, fearful of his own potential and penitential position as a sodomite both literally – as he likely is laying just as Ganymede and Helen are at the beginning of the poem – and figuratively, because if we read this author and his work as monastic, then he is fixed in a homosocial environment. In the monastery, as Kolve makes clear, Ganymede remains a potent symbol and the specter of sodomy is not gone. And sodomy, the ending of the poem reminds us, will forever haunt the Dreamer/poet:

The vision befell me by the will of God.  
Let the Sodomites blush, the Gomorrhans weep.  
Let everyone guilty of this deed repent.  
God, if I ever commit it, have mercy on me!<sup>43</sup>

This dream seems to remind the poet and reader that the queer failure of Ganymede’s sexual appetites cannot be forgotten nor cured – for outside the poem, he cannot dispel sodomy with a marriage to Helen, or anyone for that

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<sup>41</sup> Warren Johansson and William A. Percy, “Homosexuality,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 155–89 at 175.

<sup>42</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> *Ganymede and Helen*, 267–70.

matter. The ending lines, with the ambiguity about the sin of the Sodomites and the potential or history of such a sin for the Dreamer, haunt this poem. Ganymede, in this poem as in others, speaks to an archaeology of feeling and affect – that of the queer failing – and rather than let failure stand in opposition to winning might it be useful to see how Ganymede stands for a rejection or critique of this system of winning and losing, as well as all kinds of premodern hierarchies and ideologies, from marriage to monasticism? And this enduring influence of Ganymede is where we might see queer time and space converge, especially in the queer failure he can represent in various poems and texts.

## Ganymede Wins?

Emphasized in John Boswell's book, these narratives of Ganymede seemingly announce the failure of queer love and the necessity for heterosexual procreation. Yet, as John Boswell's aforementioned work demonstrates, debate follows Ganymede. Indeed, in *CSTH*, Boswell devotes an entire chapter to what he calls "The Triumph of Ganymede," which is followed by a section called "The Rise of Intolerance."<sup>44</sup> Part of the controversial "Boswell Thesis" (not so named by Boswell), this chapter interrogates a body of literature – among which he briefly includes *Altercatio* – centered on expressions of love for youths largely by those figures in positions of authority in institutions such as the medieval Church which gave them a certain amount of safety.<sup>45</sup> According to Boswell, "none was accused of entertaining unorthodox opinions, either during his lifetime or subsequently."<sup>46</sup> And these texts centered on Ganymede – Boswell includes three poetic treatments of Ganymede in an appendix that includes eighteen translations

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<sup>44</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 243–66.

<sup>45</sup> Mathew Kuefler, "The Boswell Thesis," in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, ed. Mathew Kuefler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1–31 at 2. In his edited volume centered on Boswell's *CSTH*, Matthew Kuefler outlines the contours of what might be described both as the central and ancillary arguments of the book and the Boswell Thesis itself: "There were four main points that form the narrative for the book: First, that Christianity had come into existence in an atmosphere of Greek and Roman tolerance for same sex eroticism. Second, that nothing in the Christian scriptures or early tradition required a hostile assessment of homosexuality; rather, that such assessments represented a misreading of scripture. Third, that early medieval Christians showed no real animosity toward same sex eroticism. Fourth, that it was only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that Christian writers formulated a significant hostility toward homosexuality, and then read that hostility back into their scriptures and early tradition."

<sup>46</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 244.

in total – show the full spectrum of responses toward his myth, a point Boswell makes in the *CSTH* itself: “use of the Ganymede figure was not necessarily a sign of participation in or even approval of the gay subculture.”<sup>47</sup> But *Ganymede and Helen* shows how queerly the poem construes time and space/orientation in highlighting the failure of Ganymede even in the apparent condemnation of Ganymede’s same-sex love and subsequent rewriting as Helen’s husband. By seeing how the twelfth-century dream vision anticipates Ahmed’s, Freeman’s, and Love’s formulations of queer space, time, and history, we can see how the past is the future for queerness in some ways, a twisting of progress, time, and success – indeed, this poem shows how “History is about to crack wide open.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Boswell, 251.

<sup>48</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 118.

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