

Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture

The Word Made Flesh

Edited by **Susannah Mary Chewning**

INTERSECTIONS OF SEXUALITY AND THE
DIVINE IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE



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The Word Made Flesh

Edited by

SUSANNAH MARY CHEWNING

Union County College, USA

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Foreword

Contemplating what I might say in this foreword (and feeling rather humbled by the task itself), I was for some reason reminded of Helen Schlegel, attempting “to realize England” in her mind, imagining outwards from *Howards End*:

She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. [It is Helen Schlegel after all, and Forster doing the writing.] But an unexpected love . . . awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable.

Although the words replaced by the ellipses above are “of the island,” Helen’s revelation—finding herself unexpectedly a crossroads for loves borne “of the flesh” and “the inconceivable”—replicates in an Edwardian householderish sort of way both the inspiration of the mostly medieval authors whose work is discussed in the ensuing pages, and what I have no doubt will become (to a lesser but nonetheless legitimately analogous degree) the shared experience of all who study the fine essays to follow.

Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh stakes out new ground in the exploration of what, until relatively recently, has been a *terra incognita* of religio-literary scholarship—those writers and texts that, at various levels, sought to clarify elements of the divine through images of the sexualized body, and aspects of the human through charged comparison with things spiritual. By insisting on the pointedly sexual as their transactional focus, the essayists here thus separate themselves and their work from the great burst of energy directed over the last decade and a half by others, many from feminist and queer-theory perspectives, toward the uses made by medieval and early modern writers of the body in its many aspects. Far from being narrowing in any negative sense, however, such self-imposed limitation has taken an opposite shape, so often the characteristic result of concentration precisely defined and controlled: as each essay raises its particular questions, we are provided deeper answers than wider-ranging work has yet laid out—and we come away the wiser.

In essentially the same manner it would be a salient error to conclude from the paragraph above that the volume in hand is anything other than wide in the scope of its coverage. While the focus of each essay may be confined purposefully to accommodate a unity of theme, the variety of works examined is considerable,

and noteworthy. Sexual metaphor and imagistic comparison being rather thick on the ground among lives and visions of women saints and mystics, it is scarcely surprising to find a primary thrust of the present collection devoted to important religious prose *Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Margarete* (Julie E. Fromer), Gertrude of Helfta (Alexandra Barratt), Margery Kempe (Liz Herbert McAvoy), the works of the so-called “Wooing Group” (Susannah Mary Chewning), and the interestingly imitative *A Talking of the Loue of God* (Michelle M. Sauer). But of course the female experience neither exhausts the field of contemporary works using a broad-ranging sexual lexicon to depict the divine/human interchange, nor was prose the only medium employed to convey its sense. So here are studies as well of the York cycle drama (Michael W. George), conduct literature (Mark Addison Amos), alchemical poetry (Cynthea Masson), Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* (M.C. Bodden), *Pearl* (Catherine S. Cox), and—in a kind of hemispheric backward glance at the topic entire—of the evolution of “corpus mysticum” as idea, object and image in England in the seventeenth century (David A. Salomon).

“Visions,” as Forster noted, seeking to explain Helen Schlegel, “may come through trying” and be the better understood by the process as well. As must be (I hope) apparent even from this brief account, what is achieved in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture* is a “recontextualization” (to borrow a term from the fine essay of Liz Herbert McAvoy) a fresh way of seeing many things in unique interrelation. Combined scholarly effort has, here, yielded clear and important results.

R.F. Yeager
Pensacola, 2003

Acknowledgements

In completing this collection, I owe a great deal of thanks first and foremost to the contributors to the volume. Each of them has been very patient and helpful as the project has developed over time. The contributors to this collection represent a wide range of scholarship, backgrounds, and specializations, and it is only through their hard work that the completed volume could take shape.

I must also thank the staff of Ashgate Publishing, both in North America and in Europe, especially Erika Gaffney, for all their support and cooperation throughout the process of completing this project.

Finally, there are several people without whose help I could not have completed this project. I would like to thank Robert F. Yeager for his continued encouragement, guidance, and support, as well as his editorial eye. To Michael W. George, who has been with this project from its very earliest stages, thank you for your help, especially with the technical issues of editing. I am very grateful for those who have helped with printing and correspondence at Union County College. And I would like to dedicate this collection to the memory of three scholars who inspired me at different points in my career, in different contexts, but whose guidance and presence endure and continue to make my work better: Basil Cottle, Ian Bishop, and Richard Sewall.



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Chapter 1

Introduction

Susannah Mary Chewning

The title of this collection, *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture*, could bear some explanation. While the idea of looking at sex and religion together is not new, especially with respect to medieval literature, the means by which the authors in this collection focus their attention on these topics is unique. *Sexuality* can be defined simply as a preference for sexual union, as in the continuum on which we currently place heterosexuality and homosexuality. It can be a broader term, as well, addressing human emotional reactions to sex itself—the act of sexual union, sexual desire, sexual abuse. It is a vague term, of course, in fact no less vague than its counterpart in this collection, the concept of the Divine. For the purposes of this collection, although most of the authors included here refer to the Judeo-Christian concept of God, the Divine is intended to refer to that realm of being outside of the human—that super-natural, super-human realm as it was known in the Middle Ages within, but not limited to, of course, Christianity and Judaism. Sexuality is therefore an obvious partner to this concept, for it is through sexual metaphors that many people, especially in the Middle Ages, are able to discuss the spiritual. Medieval Christians are, after all, Brides of Christ, married to the Church, sons and daughters of a patriarchal God, known to that divine being as His beloved, His spouse, His lemmán.¹ We speak of religion in these types of sexual terms, and we often refer to sex in terms of religious experience, calling the sex act itself divine and using metaphors of spiritual union and transcendence to describe sexual desire and consummation.

In my own work, I have often addressed this paradox, questioning the entire genre of mysticism and how it is perceived among fallacies of logocentric and patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality, in an effort to see it as a disruptive and de-stabilizing force within literary and theological discourse. Mysticism is, after all, disruptive of all the levels of discourse that try to define and contain it: it is Other, both as a life-style choice and as it exists textually within medieval literature. An ideal example of how disruptive the (sexual) mystic (or even simply the sexualized medieval woman) can be is found in the twelfth century English rule for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*. In this work, the speaker is directing anchoresses in their behavior, both spiritual and otherwise. He writes: “For-thi wes I-haten on Godes laye thet put were I-wriyen eaver, ant yef ani were unwriyen ant beast feolle

ther-in, he the unwreath the put hit schulde yelden. This ios a swithe dredful word to wummon thet schaweth hire to wepmones echne" (*Ancrenne Wisse* II:99-101) [For this reason it was commanded in God's law that a pit should always be covered, and if anyone uncovered a pit and a beast fell in, the one who had uncovered the pit had to pay for it . . . This is a most fearsome saying for a woman who shows herself to the eyes of men" (Savage and Watson 69)].² The author's metaphor here is thinly veiled as a sexual slur—not only are these (chaste) religious women to keep themselves covered to protect men from wanting to molest them, but their entire being is categorized by the sexualized metaphor of a "pit": "Everything to do with her, whatever it may be, which might readily awaken sinful love, our Lord calls all of it a pit" (Savage and Watson 69). Religious women, already problematic by their very existence within (or without) the Church, are reminded of their disruptive presence as women—their very devotion to Christ, here, is sexualized because of their gender.

Although the two ideas, sexuality and spirituality, seem closely linked, their similarities are not always closely examined. In fact, despite my examples above, many people are embarrassed by discussions which include references to sexuality as spiritual and vice versa. When I began work on my dissertation, which uses this relationship between sexuality and the Divine as a guiding concept, I had to be careful how I described it to certain audiences, for fear that accusations of indecency or irrelevancy would be made. Perhaps this is at the root of the central problem addressed by this collection: culturally it is very difficult for most people to see the sexual in the Divine and the Divine in sexuality, in spite of the fact that the two concepts do co-exist, and not only in medieval literature. In fact, in many contexts, they are indistinguishable—and therein lies the unique nature of this collection.

In recent years there has been much said and written about medieval concepts of sex and sexuality, including *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (1996); *Constructing Medieval Sexualities*, edited by Lochrie, McCracken, and Schultz (1997); *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*, edited by Ruth Mazo Karras (1996); *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*, by Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg (1998); *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*, by Robert S. Sturges (2000); *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, by Lynn Enterline (2000); *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (2000); *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (2000); and *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, by Ruth Mazo Karras (2002). In these works, the authors address sexuality in a range of works by medieval authors, as well as in the context of medieval life and culture. Some, as in Fradenburg's collection, focus on queer sexuality, with articles such as "Straight Minds/'Queer' Wishes in Old French Hagiography: *La Vie de Sainte Euphrosine*" and "Sodomy and Resurrection: The

Homoerotic Subject of the *Divine Comedy*.” Others focus on specific works or authors, such as Sturges’ volume on the Pardoner. Some address aesthetics, such as Michael Camille’s “Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation.” Others focus on exclusively feminine, masculine, or queer depictions of sex and sexuality in the Middle Ages, such as Schulenburg’s *Forgetful of Their Sex*, Beidler’s collection, *Masculinities in Chaucer* (1997), or Garrett Epp’s “The Vicious Guise: Effeminacy, Sodomy, and Mankind” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (2000). What is sought with this collection is a broader focus upon both sexuality and spirituality within the larger field of Medieval Studies. While collections focusing on one type of sexuality or one version of sexual expression within medieval art have been useful and important additions to various libraries and individuals, what is needed, it seems, is a collection that focuses on the meeting point of the two concepts—where sex and religion distinguish themselves from one another *and where they do not*.

Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh is just such a collection, for in it we serve to analyze not only the sexual in spirituality, but also the spiritual in sexuality. The articles here address both masculine and feminine heterosexuality as well as a range of queer or “Other” sexual expressions in various genres of medieval writing. Ideally, they will give the reader a sense of the breadth of sexual expression that existed within the world of medieval writers, but they will also do something more. As a group the articles in this collection serve to reassess the manner in which such notions as sexuality, spirituality, and even medieval authorship have thus far been addressed. This is achieved by an unique blend of genres and perspectives that the authors here discuss. For example, whereas most collections of any sort on medieval literature tend to address one or another genre (such as poetry, fiction, drama, or a traditional percentage of each), the authors here expand upon traditional notions of genre itself, including as texts both traditional works and others, such as conduct books, rules of religious order, mystical devotional works, even the body of the mystical writer. The collection, then, blends traditional ideas of both sexuality and religion in medieval literature with new, post-modern ideas on both topics and on literature itself.

The need for such a collection, and the audience it seeks to address, is clear. Part of its intention is to participate in the on-going conversation about the presence of sexuality in literature. Since Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994), medievalists have worked, in the context of the classroom, conference presentation, and publication to attend to the rising interest within and outside of Medieval Studies in issues of sexuality and gender. Many collections, monographs, articles, and other publications have been dedicated to this topic. Countless conference sessions have been organized in which we have shared our thoughts on the growing interest and relevance of sexuality to medieval literature. The discussion has left the classroom, now, in fact, and entered the larger arena of intellectual thought. I attended a “Queer Middle Ages” conference a few years ago

at New York University which was attended by right-wing demonstrators (none of whom were scholars of literature or medievalists, in fact) who wanted our conversation to end—who wanted any discussion of Other sexuality and its relationship to the larger world, especially one so public, to end. Such demonstrations, as well as the positive, supportive remarks such groups as The Society for the Study of Homosexuality in the Middle Ages receive, make it obvious that the study of sexuality itself is compelling enough to warrant a collection of this kind. This collection is unique, however, in its attempt to see the sexual in the spiritual and vice versa—and to see sexuality and the Divine as not one or another possibility but as part of a larger continuum that continues to adapt to human experience and progress.

Specifically, the authors included in this collection address many important aspects of both the sexual and the spiritual in medieval culture and literature. Alexandra Barratt, for example, makes an unexpected claim that sexuality and its more prurient aspects should not, in fact, be the focus of critical attention with respect to female-authored mystical writing. She argues that “Gertrud makes great use of images . . . drawn from various conjugal and erotic relationships: those of husband and wife, bridegroom and bride and . . . king and queen: But on close examination most are anemic and lack sensual energy” (107). Barratt refers to Gertrud’s imagery as “charming, even sentimental, but conventional and inoffensive” (107). This is not the easy argument to make with respect to such texts, for recent criticism has, indeed, sexualized mysticism and, particularly the kind expressed by the community of women in Helfta, to the point that it is almost assumed by critics that such a gendered, sexualized view must be taken. Thus Barratt, like other authors in the collection, chooses a new road in her analysis of the text and, in so doing, represents desire and intimacy in the text in an unconventional manner.

Other articles in the collection address the notion of queer, Other sexuality in medieval literature. Masson discusses the metaphor of queer sexuality within fifteenth century alchemical literature. She uses the word *queer* as an adjective to modify the metaphorical copulation depicted in alchemical literature in order to conceive a substantive presence of the Divine through “The Philosophers’ Stone” (37). This idea that the Other can somehow summon up the presence of the Divine, in fact has some degree of privileged access to that presence, is at the heart of medieval concepts of desire, sexuality, and the sacred.

Liz Herbert McAvoy, Catherine Cox, and Mary Catherine Bodden all address established authors and texts but do so using new critical perspectives. McAvoy, in her study of Margery Kempe, seeks to re-contextualize Kempe and her mysticism as performative, while Cox seeks to redefine the categories of gender that have traditionally been applied to medieval literature, using the alliterative *Pearl* as her guiding text, in order to argue for a transference of authority and voice

between the Pearl maiden and the narrator. She writes

the *Pearl*-dreamer fuses both [the maiden's] words and her image in an erotic objectification . . . ignoring the *Pearl*-maiden's attempts to teach him her own representation of the "improper," and privileging instead the limited decorum of *fin'amors*. While within the dream-frame, the *Pearl*-dreamer remains within the realm of the literal, trapped within the unisemy of the carnal word and largely constrained by literalness and superficiality while attending primarily to delights of vision. (81)

The most obvious resource for this type of discussion, medieval mystical texts are, again, addressed in new ways throughout the volume. Like Barratt's re-thinking of the erotic in Gertrud of Helfta, Julie Fromer re-thinks and re-categorizes the language and focus of the mystical/hagiographical *Liflade and the Passion of Seinte Margarete*. Fromer re-situates the gaze of the text from the suffering of the saint to her physically inscribed suffering body. David Salomon questions the categories of the mystic and the body by asserting that "by the end of the sixteenth century . . . the *corpus mysticum* was no longer used to denote the physical body of Christ or the mystic" (135), but rather the body of mystical works and treatises which had become so much a part of the medieval and Renaissance culture by that period.

This collection, ultimately, will not change the face of Medieval Studies or, in fact, of gender or sexuality as it is used to examine literary works. It will, however, continue the discussion that began, perhaps, with Foucault and Butler and has spread to Medieval Studies through such works as Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* and Boswell's study of pre-modern same-sex unions. Like any post-modern study, the aim of this collection is to re-examine and re-frame sexuality in its relation to the Divine, not in order to rearrange the binary of sex and religion (a binary, as I have noted, that does not, ultimately, exist as an opposition), but in order to see two central metaphors of medieval thought—the erotic and the divine—as defining one another through their mutual and distinct expression.

Notes

- 1 *Lemman* is a Middle English word used only in the context of secular language to refer to the beloved, until, that is, the anchoritic devotional material of the twelfth and thirteenth century when it is frequently used in this context.
- 2 All translations from *Ancrene Wisse* in this volume are taken from *Anchoritic Sprituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*. Trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson. Mahwah: Paulist P, 1991.



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Part I

Secular Literature and Drama



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