



An illustration in Guido da Pisa's *Commentary on Dante* showing sodomites in hell (ca 1345).

## European Art: Medieval

by William J. Travis

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To study queer medieval art is to leave the mainstream of contemporary thinking about the Middle Ages, to reflect, instead, on coded messages of gender and sexuality in the visual culture of a remote civilization.

Only in the past generation have medievalists begun to explore this unfamiliar territory, thanks to which four or five key problems of visual representation can now be identified: the depiction of acts "against nature," the portrayal of "homosexuality" in the Bible and in mythology, the representation of sexual ambiguity, and the marginalization or destruction of images.

Despite their apparent diversity, all of these issues intersect in the desire to construct an iconography--or subject matter--of medieval art, a period of European art that extends from about 300 to about 1400.

### **Sodomy and Acts "Against Nature"**

The very definition of our subject is problematical once we accept the notion that sexuality has its own history. As historians such as John Boswell, James Brundage, Michel Foucault, Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, Helmut Puff, and others have pointed out, even the vocabulary we use to analyze medieval experience carries an anachronistic burden, as "homosexual," "queer," and "gay" are all modern terms without equivalents in the terminology of the time.

The closest medieval analog would be *sodomy*, a word whose connotations ranged from same-sex sexual acts to bestiality, heresy, treason, and Judaism. At the same time, behaviors now associated with homoeroticism, such as men holding hands or kissing on the lips, were often asexual in the Middle Ages (at least, when these acts connoted friendship or feudal obligations).

Medieval categories were clearly different from our own, and the visual evidence is equally problematical. A corbel (or sculptured bracket) from the French church of La Sauve Majeure, now at the Cloisters Museum in New York, provides a case in point. Depicting two men locked together in a complicated pose, the corbel is sometimes interpreted as a scene of dual penetration, although it just as likely represents a fight: the interpretation depends in great measure on the assumptions each viewer brings to the image.

Or again, depictions of men playing chess may actually be intended to suggest that the men have other things on their mind, as Silke Tammen has suggested, since chess typically symbolizes seduction in medieval art and literature.

In other words, we may read sexual behavior in an image where there is none and fail to see it in cases where there is.

Key to the medieval rejection of same-sex sexual acts was the belief that such behavior violated nature. In art this idea is especially clear in the illustrated bestiary, a popular text on zoology whose readers would learn, among other things, that hyenas unnaturally change sex several times during their lives.

A twelfth-century English bestiary drew the logical inference by showing a homosexual encounter between two hyenas standing on their haunches to embrace (an image examined by Michael Camille and James Saslow). The point of the illustration was not the physical act alone, but the spiritual transgression "against nature" implicit in the comparison between unclean beasts, Jews, and idolaters. Perhaps the animal imagery also allowed artists to portray acts too shocking to associate with humans.

### **The Bible and Mythology**

Medieval interpretations of scripture provided a particularly important source of attacks on homoeroticism. In the *Bible Moralisée*, a vast picture Bible first produced in Paris ca 1225, several miniatures have homosexual themes, linked by the supporting sequence of images referring to lust, greed, simony, heresy, blasphemy, idolatry, and the like.

One roundel depicts kissing women and copulating men below another roundel of Adam and Eve, in an opposition that draws attention to natural and unnatural couples (this is also one of the few known images of lesbianism from the period).

Tammen has suggested that, on another level, such imagery may reflect the increasingly repressive attitudes of the Church following the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.

Sometimes we also find sodomites cowering in Hell, as in the Danish wall painting of Birkerød and illuminated manuscripts of Guido da Pisa's *Commentary on Dante*, even though the Bible itself never puts sodomites there.

Classical mythology offered a more ambivalent reading of same-sex sexuality. In medieval interpretations of classical mythology homoeroticism could suggest damnation or salvation, according to the symbolic guise it assumed.

Particularly suggestive was the tale of a shepherd named Ganymede, whose beauty so captivated Zeus that, disguised as an eagle, the king of gods carried off the youth to rape or seduce him. If today we read the story as a tale of same-sex desire, in the Middle Ages writers often detected a veiled message about the love of God. The anonymous fourteenth-century author of the *Moralized Ovid* even turned Zeus and Ganymede into symbols of Christ and John the Evangelist.

Shorn of uplifting sentiment, however, the tale became a virulent condemnation of homoerotic yearnings, as seen, for instance, in a Romanesque capital at Vézelay, where a devil stares directly at the viewer while making a hideous grimace.

### **Sexual Ambiguity**

Equally disturbing for medieval audiences was the depiction of sexual ambiguity, though here again the broader symbolic context colored the interpretation. In her study of early fifteenth-century manuscripts produced for the Valois court, Diane Wolfthal brings to light several instances of cross-dressing and gender uncertainty.

The most colorful example of transgending from our period, however, is the legend of St. Wilgefortis, a woman who escaped the unwelcome advances of a male suitor only after growing a beard. Crucified for her noble resolve, she inspired a cult that lasted four hundred years (from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth century), as a result of which images of bearded ladies on the cross spread across Europe well into the modern age.

Christ's sexuality has also encouraged a certain amount of speculation, largely in response to Leo

Steinberg's reading of the eroticized Jesus in Renaissance art. In a reevaluation of Early Christian and Byzantine art, Thomas Mathews proposes that several sarcophagi and mosaics depicted an androgynous Christ, not to celebrate the libido, but to neutralize it; while on the contrary, Richard Trexler sees the lightly-clad Christ in late-medieval Crucifixions as a challenge to male arousal.

For Karma Lochrie, images of Christ's wound suggest a vulva or vagina, giving a sexual charge to female mysticism, while for Caroline Walker Bynum, the critical issue is gender roles, not "genitality." As an example she cites a Swabian altarpiece of ca 1440 where Christ's feeding the apostles and washing their feet at the Last Supper casts him in a "female role."

### **Marginality and Censorship**

Thus far we have surveyed types of scenes depicted by medieval artists. Where these scenes appeared is of equal interest. Not surprisingly, representations of sodomy often occurred in zones outside the main field of vision, paralleling the marginalization of "homosexuality" in medieval society.

In her pathbreaking study of Gothic miniatures, Lillian Randall finds a number of sexually charged motifs in the margins of manuscript pages, including men handling each others' genitals or shooting arrows up each others' hindquarters (interestingly enough, the most graphic descriptions from her list are not illustrated in the plates).

Misericords (or the carved undersides of wooden choir stalls) offered another opportunity for depicting lewd scenes, designed to be crushed by the clerics sitting on them, though the fact that these seats were sometimes displayed in the upright position raises interesting questions about conflicting goals of punishment and delight.

The uneven geographic distribution of such motifs may also be relevant. For instance, while several misericords in Spain (at Astorga, León, Seville, and elsewhere) portray homosexual acts, nothing comparable is known in England. Whether this regional difference reflects cultural attitudes, or the subsequent, post-medieval destruction of such material in England, is a question which further research will need to address.

It is clear, however, that some works were intentionally destroyed because of their homosexual content, providing a chilling parallel to the actual burning of sodomites in medieval Europe.

Examples of destroyed and censored images include Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland* (ca 1200), which purportedly showed a same-sex union scandalous enough to be ripped from the book, and an Icelandic law prohibiting the representation of conquerors sexually penetrating their male enemies.

Sometimes images simply omitted offensive material, as in Nardo di Cione's fresco of Hell in a Florentine church, which portrays every torment described by Dante except that for sodomites.

In each of these cases, we find a different connotation for homosexuality. The *Topography of Ireland* preserves the response of an antagonistic viewer; the Icelandic law equates sodomy with humiliation; and Nardo's fresco suggests a fear of contaminating images. As James Saslow has noted, homosexual themes were particularly dangerous in art (as opposed to literature) because the representation of homoeroticism could promote the very behavior it sought to suppress.

### **Conclusion**

The no man's land of queer medieval art may be considerably richer than is generally recognized. In terms of coverage alone, the examples cited here embrace several media, extend from one end of the Middle Ages to the other, and cover a broad geographic area.

The scholarship suggests, further, that notions of sexual identity prevalent today had limited relevance a thousand years ago; more important was the idea that sexual behavior outside marriage and procreation violated a moral principle, although the principle in question varied widely, allowing medieval artists to link same-sex sexual acts to idolatry, heresy, greed, and the like.

Given this diversity, the depiction of homosexuality never hardened into a formula: hyenas, kissing women, copulating men, sufferers in Hell, and possibly chess-players represent many different ways of evoking the sin. Well-known themes such as Ganymede and Zeus also accommodated various readings according to the degree, or absence, of Christian allegory.

Much work remains to be done. Early medieval art, secular art, lesbianism, patronage, and reception are areas in particular need of study. The gradual opening of modern society to homosexuality, however, has also opened a window onto medieval art that previous generations had shut tight. As scholarship has come out of the closet, a new way of looking at the past has become possible.

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