

Same-soul Desire in Late Medieval England

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, I explore to what extent an erotic orientation toward others' spiritual characteristics, specifically with regard to "clean" souls, was strongly idealized in at least two medieval English locales, the central Midlands and the North Riding of Yorkshire. Where a hetero-genital orientation was pervasively considered proper with regard to erotic attraction then as today, I propose that, additionally, a desire to associate on a spiritual level with not only those of the same religion but also of like spiritual purity governed desire. As I will argue, this orientation to a spiritual sameness stemmed from a meme of preferred association in life with other Christians with clean souls. I refer to this desire for association with Christian sameness as a homo-spiritual orientation. As I will argue, this homospiritality was the primary basis of erotic desire portrayed and prescribed in the evidence considered in this study. In sum, I argue that fifteenth-century English ways of knowing and feeling desire, reflected in models of desire in romance poetry in these two locales, evidences an erotic orientation based on homospirital lines of attraction. Moreover, in each area, the models of lay homospirital erotics were preceded by and coincided with religious writings on the subject that contributed to an overall intellectual current.

DEDICATION

For Tony Ellis

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## Chapter 1 Spiritual-sexual Seeks Same

Late in 2015, the popular online dating website OkCupid.com launched a pilot program, expanding the list of sexual orientations from which users can choose beyond their longstanding options of “gay,” “straight,” and “bisexual.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to these, users may now choose multiple identities that include asexual, pansexual, lesbian, heteroflexible, homoflexible, queer, questioning, demisexual, and sapiosexual. As news outlets note, the website’s change is in response to a growing expression of fluidity in sexuality and gender.<sup>2</sup> More than a mere expansion of the prevailing paradigm of sexuality, however, some of these identities represent a growing *categorical* shift in popular conceptions of desire in the West.

While identities such as homo/heteroflexible, pansexual, and even asexual define themselves relative to the binary categories of homosexual and heterosexual, the identities demisexual and sapiosexual break away from this relational dependence. The prefixes in demisexual, which describes romantic and sexual attraction stemming from a preceding asexual, emotional attraction, and sapiosexual, describing romantic and sexual attraction to demonstrated intellect, refer not to where the sexual identity falls on the continuum between homosexual and heterosexual, but instead to a non-corporeal

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<sup>1</sup> Neda Ulaby, “Sapiosexual Seeks Same: A New Lexicon Enter Online Dating Mainstream,” *NPR.org*, 4 December, 2014, accessed 5 January, 2015, <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2014/12/04/368441691/sapiosexual-seeks-same-a-new-lexicon-enters-online-dating-mainstream>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

characteristic to which someone is attracted. Where sexual epistemology since the end of the nineteenth century has understood sexual attraction primarily, often exclusively, in terms of primary and secondary sex characteristics to which someone is attracted, the introduction of terms like sapiosexual and demisexual into mainstream use signals, on the one hand, a destabilizing of the dominance that attraction to sexed bodies has held not only in our popular and scholarly epistemology of sexuality, but in our lived, sexual ontology. On the other hand, it marks a resurfacing of noncorporeal bases of desire, ones from which we might learn how to envision, enact, and embody our current frontiers of noncorporeally based erotic attraction.

In this study, I explore to what extent an erotic orientation toward others' spiritual characteristics, specifically with regard to "clean" souls, was strongly idealized in at least two medieval English locales, the central Midlands and the North Riding of Yorkshire. But particularly because this study aims precisely to deconstruct and reassemble our own ways of knowing medieval desire, a note first on terminology. In twenty-first century English, we most commonly categorize our desire for other humans in terms of "sexual orientation" — when in fact we know well from each of our individual experiences that far more than the "sex" assigned to bodies determines our desires for those occupying them. This is in part the first premise of this study: that there is far more to how we orient our desire for intimacy with other humans than their "sex."<sup>3</sup> But in order to call into

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, further, that this study depends on the knowledge that not only gender identity but the "sex" of bodies is socially constructed, and thus the distinction between sex and gender loses its edge. For this I do not so much use them interchangeably as I do discuss *sexed* bodies — bodies *assigned* a particular sex by others — or more often simply refer to gendered bodies.

question how we talk about desire in the first place, let me set some basic terms, and how you may expect them to be used throughout this study.

On the one hand, this study necessitates some specificity when it comes to the terms “sexual,” “romantic,” and “physical.” In line with prevailing understandings of identity and interpersonal attraction, I understand these three to be distinct from one another: “sexual” or what I will sometimes call *genital arousal* of one human for another can occur independent from romantic attraction for them. Each of these, in turn, can operate separately from appreciation for their physical form: their body in its totality, including but not limited to primary and secondary sexed characteristics. These distinctions are illuminated, in part, by the contemporary identity category of asexual, a person who may feel fully a romantic affinity for another, but with no genital arousal whatever — even as they may appreciate the physical form of that person.

On the other hand, while this study necessitates specificity with regard to distinguishing genital arousal from romantic attraction from physical appreciation, it also demands room for ambiguity. Thus in the following chapters, I employ the terms *erotic* and *desire* with some liberty. As I have argued elsewhere, even through thousands of years of debate and philosophizing about the true meaning of *eros* in our lives, no clear, definitive sense has emerged.<sup>4</sup> The erotic can include one, two, or all three of the above: the “sexual,” romantic, and physical. Moreover, eroticism can include spiritual affinity, as I will argue throughout this study. But it is certainly not limited to these four, beyond a

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Ambler, Ana Došen, and Kristina Kočan, “Introduction,” *PanEroticism* (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2015).



certain *je ne sais quoi*, nor is it always clear which of them pervades or prevails. Thus throughout this study I make an effort to speak of genital, romantic, physical, and spiritual desire with distinction as necessary — and speak of erotic desire either when it is unclear which or how many of these are present, or when certainly more than one is.

Concomitantly, I will specify to which type of desire I refer when possible — and allow “desire” when it stands alone to mean erotic desire, broadly, with all its potentiality. This ambiguity, even, I find necessary in order to avoid presumption — either from presentist bias, or for lack of historical evidence. Much ink has been spilled, for instance, over whether or not Aelred of Rievaulx had a homosexual orientation. But for lack of explicit discussion in his writings, we will never know what determined Aelred’s genital arousal, or his romantic attraction. But we can say with more clarity that his writings evidence a strong, broadly defined erotic orientation toward men. And, more to the point, I will argue that he delineates a very clear spiritual desire for other men, but that is not necessarily limited to that kind of desire alone.

Where a hetero-genital orientation was pervasively considered proper with regard to erotic attraction then as today, I propose that, additionally, a desire to associate on a spiritual level with not only those of the same religion but also of like spiritual purity governed desire. As I will argue, this orientation to a spiritual sameness stemmed from a meme (that is, beliefs and behaviors shared and passed among individuals in a culture) of preferred association in life with other Christians with clean souls. As a means of building a terminological bridge between spiritual discourse and erotic terminology, I

refer to this desire for association with Christian sameness as a homo-spiritual orientation. As I will argue, this homospirituality was the *primary* basis of erotic desire portrayed and prescribed in the evidence considered in this study. For this, I will concomitantly suggest that we ought to consider whether the dominant culture in the Middle Ages may be more representatively described by a culture of homospiritual erotic orientation than one of “heterosexual” orientation.

This is not to say, certainly, that an enforced culture of hetero-gendered desire was not applied throughout medieval society. Rather, I think that we must consider how deeply this heterosexism was rooted in a homospiritualism. Ultimately, I find this critical in our attempts to understand contemporary religious and secular discourses on gender and desire, and what we are doing as a society to understand and meet our needs. And while I believe that compelling arguments can be made that an erotic orientation based on spiritual state was both idealized and pervasively practiced in Christian society from at least the High to Late Middle Ages, I focus in this study on the middle to late fifteenth century, in two locales from which substantial textual evidence survives, and for which we know comparatively much about the texts’ audiences and their culture. These cultural artifacts survive in manuscripts from mid- to late-fifteenth century England in the central Midlands (for the purposes of this study, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Leicestershire) and the North Riding of Yorkshire.

In sum, I argue that fifteenth-century English ways of knowing and feeling desire, reflected in models of desire in romance poetry in these two locales, evidences an erotic

orientation based on homospiritual lines of attraction. Moreover, in each area, the models of lay homospiritual erotics were preceded by and coincided with religious writings on the subject that contributed to an overall intellectual current. In the central midlands, both lay and religious literati inherited the writings of Jacques de Vitry, who explicitly espoused orientation in one's life to a sameness of spiritual cleanness; this advice saw enactment in his own life in his relationship with holy woman Marie d'Oignies and was subsequently recorded in his Latin *vita* of her, which was eventually transmitted into Middle English and made its way through lay hands into the Carthusian house, Beauvale, outside Nottingham. In the North Riding of Yorkshire, Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spiritali amicitia* contributed to this ideological current in detailing a ladder of affections, building toward union with God, that included homospiritual, erotic desire — even for those of same genitals — as an appropriate rung.

While not explicit influences on the romance poetry of the regions, Jacques's and Aelred's writing clearly precede and parallel the idealized portrayals of homospiritual desire in the romances that circulated among gentry and urban “middle class” household miscellanies in both regions. Three manuscripts in particular, which I will take as exempla in the chapters that follow, stand out; Surviving from the North Riding of Yorkshire, Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91 (commonly known as the Thornton Manuscript), was copied and read at East Newton Manor, home of the Thornton family throughout the high to late Middle Ages, a mere 6 miles from Rievaulx Abbey. In the central midlands, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 and Cambridge, University

Library, MS Ff.2.38, both compiled in Leicester, both average 27 miles adjacent to Beauvale outside Nottingham, where the Middle English manuscript of Jacques de Vitry's *vita* of Marie was held.

In sum, these textual witnesses suggest that the central Midlands and the North Riding of Yorkshire are representative locales of a fifteenth-century investment in an ideology of homospiritual erotic orientation. I argue, further, that apprehending this homospiritual eroticism as fully as possible has the potential to bear contemporary fruit, beyond historical inquiry. For one, engaging contemporary conversations on what determines desire with the extensive body of medieval discourse on the same subject can provide a sort of “ghost of queerness yet to come.” Bringing the past in conversation with our contemporary questions may well explode our capacity to explore, develop, and navigate our erotic identities today. For another, apprehending these medieval, mainstream erotics as analogues of contemporary queer erotics — and hybridizing medieval religious and contemporary secular discourses on desire — can help bridge the gap between contemporary religious homophobic discourse and queer secular discourse.

Toward this end, I present this work in seven chapters, this introduction included. Chapter two will, in large part, detail what I have covered briefly above of my theory of general homospirituality, and its theoretical bases. The chapter will, moreover, discuss homospirituality's underpinnings in the binary nature of medieval soteriology by way of considering Augustine's *De civitate Dei*. Augustinian understandings of salvation pervaded the Christian Middle Ages, such that his thinking on not only it but marriage

and other topics was “the standard against which to judge subsequent developments.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, attitudes about salvation, including the attitudes on spiritual cleanness present in the fifteenth-century locales that are my main focus, may be understood via Augustine’s articulation in *De civitate Dei* that there are only two extratemporal destinations for the soul: one for those who are saved, and one for those who are not (acknowledging that the Fourth Lateran development of purgatory, while seemingly a liminal status between these two binaries, ultimately represented a sort of waiting room for those already predestined for heaven). It will discuss, then, the relationship between soteriology and popular conceptions of spiritual cleanness.

There was, on the one hand, an exclusively binary category of saved/damned and polar categories of clean/unclean and, on the other hand, binaries that coexisted with more nuanced praxes. Sin came to be highly categorized along a continuum between the two binaries, so to speak, as is particularly evident in penitential manuals. Salvation and damnation were the only two extratemporal termini, but different sins were viewed along a scale of severity, where manuals dictated many years of penance for some, and far less for others. Notably, same-genital intercourse was not necessarily so far to the unclean end of the spectrum: in doling out the number of years of penance appropriate for various same-genital sexual offenses, the English penitential of Theodore, for instance, assigns same-genital sexual acts penitential durations equal to, or even less than, those for other sins such as incest, fornication, infanticide, perjury in a church, adultery, “persistent”

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: a Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992), 11.

theft, or homicide.<sup>6</sup> This represents, further, that same-genital sins were merely part of a constellation of threats to the homospiritual imperative.

Chapter three, in tandem with chapter four, will discuss textual artifacts of homospiritual desire in the central Midlands. After evidencing Jacques's personal and homilistic understandings of homospiritual living through his reflections on his academic life in Paris and his advice to parishioners, the chapter will discuss Jacques's contribution to this ideological current of homospiritual desire, namely in his biography of Marie d'Oignies, where he more explicitly describes actual genital arousal based on his homospiritual desire. This explicit articulation of homospiritual sexuality originates in this early thirteenth-century Latin text, but by the fifteenth century finds its way into a Middle English copy in the Carthusian house of Beauvale, just outside Nottingham. The house was, hypothetically, supposed to be closed off to the outside laity, but its financial difficulties meant that it opened its doors for mass and donation. And while this certainly does not mean that the laity necessarily had access to this exemplum of homospiritual eroticism, it does establish a certain cultural fluidity between the charterhouse and the surrounding populace, and opens up the possibility that Jacques's account participated in the textual eddies of homospiritual desire in the central Midlands, along with the romances in Ashmole 61 and Cambridge Ff.2.38.

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<sup>6</sup> Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1955), 105–06. See also Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 40.

Chapter four will, after detailing the characteristics of gentry and urban craft culture, consist of close readings of two romances that evidence homospiritual desire in Leicestershire, adjacent to Nottingham. In *Bevis of Hampton*, found in Cambridge Ff. 2.38, when the titular, Christian knight encounters a “Saracen” Muslim princess, he rejects her advances, despite the portrayed desirability of her physical form. Bevis, instead, expresses a homospiritual desire for a partner of like spiritual cleanness, and in a Sedgwickian heterospiritual panic, flees to a nearby inn. When the princess finds him there and pledges to convert, and be washed clean of sin, Bevis’s desire immediately orients itself to her, whereupon he pledges marriage and kisses her. Where his attraction is driven primarily by a desire for spiritual sameness, its expression and enactment predominates his overall erotic orientation.

In Ashmole 61, the titular protagonist of the *Erle of Tolous* (found also in Cambridge Ff.2.38) becomes impassioned for a married woman while furtively gazing at her as she prays, and then loses all interest when she is accused of adultery; when he disguises himself as a monk and personally confesses her and judges her virtue true, however, his desire is reignited and he marries her upon her husband’s death.<sup>7</sup> While the Earl is the one crossdressing as a monk, it is his love’s alleged crossing from homo- to hetero- and back to homo-spiritual relationality to the earl that evokes a sort of trans-spiritual phobia in him.

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, ed., “*Erle of Tolous*,” *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

Chapters five and six will discuss a monastic dialogue and romance poems both extant from the North Riding of Yorkshire, all textual artifacts of homospiritual eroticism. In *De spiritali amicitia*, Aelred of Rievaulx contributes a substantial artifact of the ideological current of homospiritual desire.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, he establishes contemplation of another's soul as the proper foundation of attraction, and various forms of sameness as the basis of the highest form of "friendship." On the other hand, he legitimates expression of this spiritually-based desire, and situates both the initial spiritual desire and its expression along lines of an extratemporality that leads, ultimately, to the pleasure of communion with God, in heaven. Aelred's framework of what I would call homospiritually oriented eroticism is significant, moreover, in that its specific articulation does not limit homospiritual desire to opposite-gender interactions, as other textual examples do, implicitly, in their singular focus on male-female desire. In other words, Aelred's homospirituality also allows for same-gender eroticism.

Chapter six follows directly from chapter five, foregrounded by the proximity of the Thornton family a mere six miles away from Rievaulx Abbey, and the historical relationship between the religious house and lay manor that paralleled that between ideals in Aelred's writing, and those in Thorntons' personal library. With this proximity in mind, the remainder of the chapter will focus on close readings of two romances extant in the Thornton Manuscript, *Sir Degrevant* and the northern version of the Middle English *Octavian*. In *Degrevant*, after the titular knight realizes that the woman he has been

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<sup>8</sup> A. Hoste and C. H. Talbot, eds., *De Spiritali Amicitia* 1.57 (Turnhout: Brepols, CCCM I, 1971).



courting has *all* of Paul's epistles written on her bedroom ceiling and under them prays the hours at night, he lurches with desire, proclaiming not only his romantic love for her, but his sexual attraction.<sup>9</sup> Degrevant's reaction to the almost flamboyant spiritual cleanness that his paramour performs evidences just how homospiritual desire could found broadly erotic and even specifically sexual expression in the medieval Christian mind.

*Octavian*, conversely, provides a negative exemplum in its character Florent: throughout the poem, the knight fails at many chivalric and masculine tasks, most pertinently abandoning his fellow Christians on the battlefield so that he may chase after a "Saracen" princess who is decidedly uninterested in conversion.<sup>10</sup> The poem explicitly outlines how Florent's problematic hetero-spiritual erotic pursuit of a pagan woman causes the death of thousands of Christians, and leaves him with neither heir nor inheritance. Florent's failure as a knight and a man in the face of patrilineal objectives serves as an indictment of his spiritually hetero-erotic orientation and, by extension, any hetero-erotic desires that its audience may have been contemplating.

In the final, concluding chapter, I will suggest possible ways that considering these examples of medieval, homospiritual eroticism can open up our contemporary epistemologies of, and discourses on, "sexuality." To this end, I will argue that there is

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<sup>9</sup> L. F. Casson, ed., *The Romance of Sir Degrevant: A Parallel-text Edition from MSS. Lincoln Cathedral A. 5.2 and Cambridge University Ff.1.6*, EETS o.s. 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), esp. ll. 1525–28.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Hudson, ed., "Octavian," *Four Middle English Romances* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).

rhetorical and political utility in replacing the terminological slippages by which our modern term “sexuality” stands for eroticism, and “sexual orientation” not merely for “erotic orientation” but for “erotic orientation vis à vis sexed bodies.” If we were to follow this same slippage in describing medieval eroticism, the “spiritual” in “homospiritual eroticism” would be elided, leaving us with simply “homoeroticism” — where, because spiritual state and not sexed body is the primary determinant of idealized attraction, a sameness of spirituality becomes the presumed referent of the prefix “homo-.” Introducing the second contemporary terminological slippage, by which “sexual” stands for overall erotic (sexual, romantic, etc.) orientation, this spiritual homoeroticism becomes, simply, homosexuality.

The decentering of the sexed body as the presumed referent of this terminology is I believe, on the one hand, important for chipping away at the presentist lenses with which we will always, to some extent, view the Middle Ages. This rhetorical challenge to our contemporary erotic nomenclature is, on the other hand, also a political and social challenge: it is a *reclamans* in the Latin sense and the English: a *crying out against* the monolithic signification of erotic desire as always centered around genitally-defined bodies — and a *reclamation* of terminology for those for whom the body is not the primary basis of attraction.

In order to scrape away the slippage from the page, then, to leave rhetorical *clamans* in favor of real reclamation, I further argue that we consider, particularly, erotic identity medieval and modern as an issue of access. Positive reclamation of the identity

of “homosexuality” brought access to community, and has brought increasing access to civil rights. The medieval relationship between erotic identity and marriage was quite different, but was nevertheless also a question of access: in that case, access to grace with God via a sacramental union, and to a utopia outside of time. As federal access to same-sexed marriage in the United States dawns, consideration of medieval homospiritual eroticism offers, on the one hand, ways of thinking through how people religious and secular may see their access to religious and civil institutions of marriage.

On the other hand, consideration of the basis of medieval homospiritual eroticism beyond the sexed body offers a rich epistemology of desire for those in the queer communities for whom the body is not the chief determinant of attraction. Reading Aelred alongside queer theorists and queer liberation theologians, particularly, offers us promising potentialities, in which reflections among medieval understandings of an extratemporal union with Christ, secular promotions of a queer utopia, and contemporary theologians’ reception of Christ as queer, stand to expand our horizons of possibility in the present and future of our temporalities, and beyond them entirely. In navigating the conflicts and commonalities among these communities, we may find that a medieval “then and there” is both a past and a future for these several communities.

## CHAPTER 2 THE MEDIEVAL “HOMO-SEXUAL”

For whoever of you has been baptized in the manner of Christ has clothed themselves in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free-born, *neither male nor female*. *In fact, you are all one* in Jesus Christ.  
— Galatians 3.27–8 (emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup>

If nothing else, reflecting on what theology and doctrine undergirded medieval erotic beliefs suggests the ambiguities of our contemporary nomenclature for erotics — genital arousal, romantic attraction, physical appreciation, spiritual affinity — both scholarly and popular. In its most basic semantic form, the “homo” in *homosexual* represents simply “sameness.” When the term “homosexual” was originally introduced into English at the turn of the twentieth century, the sameness that “homo” happened to signify was one of sex assigned based on genitals. Leo Bersani highlights the association of “homo-ness” and “sameness” in his book *Homos*. But in his use of “same” throughout the book, he does not seem to separate the “same” from “same-sex” nor otherwise allow it to stand for any other meaning of sameness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis. non est Iudaeus neque Graecus non est servus neque liber non est masculus neque femina omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu.” The Latin “Vulgate” Bible, the version of the text with which literate medieval people would have been most familiar. (All translations in this study, from Latin, Middle English, and contemporary French, are my own, unless otherwise noted.)

<sup>12</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), e.g., 73.

I would like to, in part, semantically liberate the “homo” from our typical conception of homosexuality, remind of its broader signifying applications, and suggest that we consider other erotic orientations based in sameness, other “homo-sexualities.” Specifically, I aim to illuminate an erotic orientation toward individuals of similar spirituality that dominated medieval ideals of attraction. Where a hetero-orientation was pervasively considered proper when it came to sexual desire for bodies, I propose that a desire to associate on a spiritual level with those of the same religion — and with spiritually “clean” souls — likewise governed desire, namely for those members of medieval society who internalized the ideals of Christian theology and doctrine. Foundational to this erotic desire for like spirituality is an overall social orientation toward spiritual sameness.

Fundamentally, such behavior simply falls within the medieval Christian tradition, evident in countless literary and religious texts throughout the Middle Ages (*Cleanness* serves as an eponymous example below). A virtuous soul free of sin was considered prerequisite for salvation. Room had to be made within the soul for God’s grace by keeping it spiritually clean. Since association with others who were spiritually unclean could welcome sin into one’s own soul, one ideally limited contact only to others of pure Christian devotion and practice. For the purposes of semantically evoking the close relationship between traditional praxis and the “homo-sexuality” I wish to discuss below, I call this desire to relate closely with those of a same spiritual persuasion

“homospiritality.” For the medieval Christian aspiring toward the ultimate goal of salvation, a sameness of spiritual cleanliness with one’s associates was essential.

This homospiritality inflected those erotic practices idealized by medieval society and, at least in some cases, even specifically sexual desire. Writers such as Aelred, Jacques de Vitry, and those composing English romance poetry demonstrate an awareness that an individual’s spiritality itself could trigger erotic attraction and even genital arousal. This sexual desire, inspired by a sameness of spiritality, a *homos*, can be usefully — at least momentarily — described as a “homo-sexual” orientation, where the spiritality of an individual was perhaps as important as the genitals of their body when determining their viability as an object of erotic desire. While attraction to heterosexual bodies was certainly commonplace in the Christian Middle Ages, expectations of who ought to be attracted to whom was ultimately dictated by what was natural according to God’s Creation, not by what was (hetero)normative. When exploring a culture for which sexual mores were, first and foremost, religious mores, we ought to, as we do in studying so many other aspects of medieval life, begin with the spirital rather than the corporeal when describing their erotics and sexuality and seeking referents for prefixes such as “homo-.”

In her foundational *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick acknowledges the importance of other factors besides sex/gender as influences on sexual object-choice. She mentions, for instance, how a subject’s sexual desire for an object can

be inflected by the object's race, class, age, or even species.<sup>13</sup> These other epistemological axes can strongly affect someone's sexual desire, despite the focus lent to the body by the genital and sexual obsession of our erotic taxonomies (hetero-, homo-, bi-, pan-, asexual, etc.). Race is a notable example, where individuals, some quite strictly, feel sexual desire only for members of their own race, only for those of another race or races, only for individuals of their own race and certain other races, and so on. We might describe such people in the first category as having, for instance, a homo-racial erotic or even sexual orientation. Where qualities of race strictly govern desire, there is little epistemological reason to give sexed characteristics the privileged position as the only axis signified when discussing erotic orientation.<sup>14</sup> If we consider that someone's erotic attractions might be just as — or even more — guided by race than by sexed bodies, then why privilege genitals over race as the presumed referent of “sexual orientation”?<sup>15</sup>

Sedgwick's acknowledgement, that far more than simply the sexed characteristics of the body inflects even sexual desire, is a rare one, however. Since, as Foucault

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<sup>13</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 31, 35.

<sup>14</sup> See *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout this study I use the prefix “genital-,” the adjective “corporeal,” or the prepositional phrase “*du corps*” to evoke the sexed state of bodies, in the interest of concision. As a white scholar, I recognize that I may imprecisely with failing sensitivity employ terminology and, as it were, white-wash the body as a non-racialized site. I recognize that this leaves me legitimately open to the same line of criticism that I employ below when discussing Sedgwick and others' treatment of erotics' many valances. Whereas this study focuses on spiritual — as opposed to any corporeal — influences on erotic orientation, I encourage, as part of the broader project to decenter the sexed body from our epistemology of erotic orientations, further exploration of taxonomies and nomenclature for understanding and describing the diverse corporeal characteristics toward which people are sexually oriented.

establishes and Sedgwick discusses, sex has been increasingly at the center of conscious thought about erotic orientation since at least the *fin de siècle*, it is neither surprising nor unproductive that so much scholarship on contemporary desire has centered on gender and bodies, rather than focusing on other contributions to erotic orientation, or acknowledging how potentially equivalent, or even paramount, those other factors might be.<sup>16</sup> Even Sedgwick herself, her keen elucidation of other “diacritical frontiers” of desire notwithstanding, goes on to focus *Epistemology of the Closet* on sexed determinants of attraction, genital orientations, as a privileged factor. While the pathbreaker foregrounded her discussion of twentieth-century, cultural binaries’ dependence on homo/hetero-sexed dichotomies with critical observation of several other axes of attraction, the twentieth-century microepoch that served as both inspiration for and subject of Sedgwick’s work demanded critical attention to the pervasive role of sexed binaries.

Sedgwick wrote *Epistemology* in 1990 amidst the strong, Western, anti-gay sentiments of the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. As she thought, wrote, and published, the gay community continued to be villainized as intrinsic agents of

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 53 ff., especially, with regard to the development of homosexuality as an identity category, 59: “L’homosexuel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle est devenu un personnage : un passé, une histoire et une enfance, un caractère, un forme de vie; une morphologie aussi, avec une anatomie indiscreète et peut-être une physiologie mystérieuse. Rien de ce qu’il est au total n’échappe à sa sexualité. Partout en lui, elle est présente : sous-jacente à toutes ses conduites parce qu’elle en est le principe insidieux et indéfiniment actif; inscrite sans pudeur sur son visage et sur son corps parce qu’elle est un secret qui se trahit toujours. Elle lui est consubstantielle, moins comme un péché d’habitude que comme une nature singulière. Il ne faut pas oublier que la catégorie psychologique, psychiatrique, médicale de l’homosexualité s’est constituée de jour où on l’a caractérisée — le fameux article de Westphal en 1870, sur les « sensations sexuelles contraires » peut valoir comme date de naissance — moins par un type de relations sexuelle que par une certaine qualité de la sensibilité sexuelle, une certaine manière d’intervertir en soi-même le masculin et le féminin. L’homosexualité lorsqu’elle a été rabattue de la pratique de la sodomie sur une sorte d’androgynie intérieure, un hermaphrodisme de l’âme. Le sadomite était un relaps, l’homosexuel est maintenant une espèce.”; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.



the HIV/AIDS pandemic, homophobic rumblings foreboded the passage of the *Defense of Marriage Act* and *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, and the proscription of non-straight sexual intimacy persisted. As these problems of human and civil rights cohered around the sexed body as a discrete political site, Sedgwick's attention to genitally oriented desire and her illumination of its pervasive influence on Western super/subordinate categories responded in kind to the socio-political needs of the day.

But despite recent rollbacks in our civil rights, and continued stigma endured by binary members of the queer community, the budding, twenty-first century sea change in Western public opinion on gay civil rights should give queer studies' continued attention to sexuality *du corps* pause. Three years after the repeal of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, a decade after *Lawrence v. Texas*, and amidst progressive decisions in *Hollingsworth v. Perry* and *United States v. Windsor*, further attention to alternate axes of erotic orientation is warranted.<sup>17</sup> As not just a scholarly but a social and political force, queer theory provides utility for the discovering of margins, the transgressing of categories, and the illumination

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<sup>17</sup> *Lawrence v. Texas* (No. 02-102, 539 U.S. 558), *Hollingsworth v. Perry* (No. 12-144, 570 U.S. \_\_\_), and *United States v. Windsor* (No. 12-307, 570 U.S. \_\_\_) are, with little argument, the three most important civil rights cases of the past ten years with respect to same-sex relationships. On 26 June, 2003, the Supreme Court of the United States of America's decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* invalidated anti-sodomy laws nationwide by ruling that same-sex sexual conduct is protected as a liberty under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. Ten years later, to the day, the Supreme Court handed down decisions in the cases *Hollingsworth v. Perry* and *United States v. Windsor* which both progressed same-sex marriage rights in the United States: in *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, the Supreme Court remanded a case back the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which had previously invalidated a ban on same-sex marriage in the State of California (California Proposition 8), finding it unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court's decision had the immediate effect of granting same-sex marriage rights to a plurality of United States citizens. In the Supreme Court's decision in *United States v. Windsor*, it upheld a decision of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, which found Section 3 of the *Defense of Marriage Act* (defining a "spouse" only as someone in a male-female marriage) unconstitutional under the Fifth Amendment. This decision paves the way for broad recognition of same-sex marriages at the federal level.

and nurturing of the unacknowledged. The demarginalization of binary Queer identities, then — the rise of homonormativity, or what we might call, following Karma Lochrie, homosynchrasies — ought to be a call for queer theorists to plumb for the queer where it needn't even be linked to the sexed body. In some sense, our queerness lies in our accident, not our substance, our relative nature rather than our intrinsic being — as the L and G slowly shed their queer skin, as do the B and T, though slower still, the mandate of queer methodology demands to boldly go. In the socio-political *court durée* of the 1990s, the centrality of the sexed body within queer studies served important critical and political ends. Two decades later, however, those other sexual-qua-erotic axes mentioned by Sedgwick, and ones yet to be honored, merit increased attention even as we continue to use queer theory to delete the prejudices it has thus far combatted and to nurture those of us to whom it has given voice.

In the afterglow of *Lawrence v. Texas*, Sedgwick's mention of other erotic axes has seen some limited attention. In the 2005 *Critical Theory Today: a User Friendly Guide*, for instance, Lois Tyson introduces to students of queer theory that "Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues [that] the intricacies of human sexuality could be understood just as well, or better, in terms of any number of paired opposites other than same-sex or different-sex object choice."<sup>18</sup> Tyson goes on to offer cunning, queer readings that go beyond the body in seeking the sources of sexual desire, with particular attention to Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Whitman's "Song of Myself," and Morrison's *Beloved*.

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<sup>18</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: a User Friendly Guide*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 335.

Tyson's introduction in a reader of an erotics *not* based on genital or other sexed characteristics will, one hopes, alleviate genital, bodily bias from our paradigms of what it means to think queerly. But what Tyson proposes students "might explore" is rapidly becoming what we *must* consider, what for some of us could have born consideration long ago.<sup>19</sup>

Critics such as Sedgwick and Tyson who acknowledge that other factors besides the sexed body might play an equal or more significant part in determining erotic and even sexual attraction are rare. Whereas these select few consider that there might be other erotic axes besides that of sexed bodies, if we do not begin substantial thinking about, illuminating of, and writing about alternate axes of desire, we risk allowing the words of those like Sedgwick and Tyson to ossify from insightful acknowledgement into dismissive exception. Their support of manifold determinants of desire will come to belie the practiced belief in the monolith of genially-determined erotics. As the sexed body remains central to our commonplace understanding of desire, continued inattention to non-sexed axes of erotics and sexuality will cause such descriptions of the many valances of orientation to construct a fantasy that these manifold inflections of sexuality are broadly acknowledged and considered.

Instead of Sedgwick's nod to "multisexualism" standing as a poignant reminder of desire's multivalence, it will become a shield that hides a monolithic approach to sexuality in a veil of scholarly awareness of manifold desires. In the same breath that the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 335–338.

body's merely cooperative position in human sexuality is admitted, its hegemony may also be reinforced. Without a substantial body of scholarship considering desire *sans corps*, such acknowledgements head off any concern that other bases of desire are being given short shrift — the overwhelming hegemonic position of genitally-based sexuality in scholarly discourse, its unquestioned ideology in the public arena, and the lack of a substantial or sustained scholarly conversation on desire *sans corps* make clear that, despite good intentions of openness to the complexities and multivalence of erotics that occasional scholars demonstrate, such openness risks becoming an ephemeral fantasy that quickly gives way to the always-central, sexualized, sexed body.<sup>20</sup>

Sedgwick's final remarks on non-sexed sexuality, however, provide a useful entrée. As she notes, socio-historical contexts have valued other axes of desire besides ones of the body.<sup>21</sup> History provides useful sites of inquiry into non-sexed desire, ones that might allow deeper reflection on how our own, modern erotic attractions might follow more than merely sexed bodies. Medieval Christian culture, in particular, offers ideals and realities of erotic, sexual, romantic, and physical desire that exemplify a diacritical frontier of desire left off even of Sedgwick's token list of alternate inflections.

Enter the spiritual.

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<sup>20</sup> I am inspired, here, by Sara Ahmed's critique of Slavoj Žižek's claim that "liberal multiculturalism is the hegemony," in which she counters that the *fantasy* of liberal multiculturalism is the hegemony, disguising a reality of monoculturalism that perpetuates continued inequality by professing tolerance, an, essentially, segregationist "separate but equal" stance. Sara Ahmed, "'Liberal Multiculturalism is the Hegemony — Its [sic] an Empirical Fact' — a Response to Slavoj Žižek," *Darkmatter: in the Ruins of Imperial Culture* (19 Feb. 2008), <<http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/02/19/'liberal-multiculturalism-is-the-hegemony---its-an-empirical-fact'-a-response-to-slavoj-zizek/>>, accessed 7 March, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 35.

*Gendered Bodies, “Natural” Desires*

In the Middle Ages, the realities of desire were quite different from the modern expressions that Sedgwick considers, both in what influenced it, and in how it was perceived. Practices and beliefs regarding erotics and sexuality were driven at once by theological and social conceptions. As Ruth Mazo Karras highlights,

It is important for our purposes to recognize that in the Middle Ages the distinction among [“sex, gender, and sexuality-qua-erotic desire”] was not just blurred, it did not exist. If someone deviated from the expected models of sexual behavior, people did not assume that the variation was a matter of biology *or* gender identity *or* sexual desire; the three worked together. Whereas we might say that an individual has a female body, a feminine identity or behavior, and a sexual desire for women, medieval people would have assumed that the desire for women came from a masculine body and, in itself, constituted masculine behavior. For them, sexuality was not separate from sex and gender...<sup>22</sup>

In the medieval mind, then, one could not be a male without also having a masculine gender expression, and without also having female object-choice: to have a male body

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

was to be masculine was to desire women (and to have a female body was to be feminine was to desire men). This amalgam is evident in medieval Christian views on religious others. Jewish men, for instance, were seen as feminized by their religion and, part and parcel, believed to have something of “female” genitals. Not uncommon was the Christian belief that Jewish men literally experienced a “bloody flux” equivalent to menstruation.<sup>23</sup> Muslim men alike were feminized: circumcision was akin to castration, leaving Muslim (and Jewish) men without any “manhood,” considered female in body.

Rare evidence of cases where this amalgam was disrupted do survive. In 1394, Eleanor (John) Rykener, who had a penis and dressed “as a woman,” was arrested for receiving anal sex as a prostitute. While Eleanor performed a feminine gender and acted as though she had sexual desire for men, the court records also clearly sexed her as male. Moreover, while her clients as a prostitute were male, the records also reflect that she had sex “as a man” with women (for personal pleasure, not for pay).<sup>24</sup> Cases like Rykener’s, however, only rarely confound what was otherwise a strongly consistent medieval amalgam of genitals-gender-desire. Generally, where gender and genitals were

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<sup>23</sup> Steven F. Kruger, “Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, The New Middle Ages, vol. 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997) 23.

<sup>24</sup> Karras, *Sexuality*, 143. See also David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, “Ut cum muliere: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth Century London”. In *Premodern Sexualities*. Edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carl Freccero. (London: Routledge, 1996), 99-116.

intertwined in the medieval mind, such men could not be feminine without also, at least in part, *bodily* being women.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to illustrating the amalgamation of genitals and gender, however, considering medieval Christian perceptions of Muslim and Jewish bodies also casts light on how, I believe, critics sometimes slip in proclaiming that *sexuality* — which should not be considered entirely concomitant with object choice — was as conflated with sexed body and gender expression as the latter two were with each other. In Karras's own explanation of the sexed-gender-sexuality amalgam quoted above, on the one hand, she employs "sexuality" as a term synonymous with genitally-based erotic orientation.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, elsewhere in the same work, Karras highlights that it would be imprudent to assume either that medieval Christians had no concept of sexuality or that their concept

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<sup>25</sup> Karma Lochrie highlights a possible exception to this indivisibility of sex and gender in her analysis of an apparent female masculinity in Amazons in medieval literature. Certainly, as she points out, the Amazons have female bodies, sexual desire for men, yet exhibit many traits and performances culturally coded as masculine, such as their wearing of armor, pugnacity, and sexual topping. In almost every case, however, their masculinity seems understood as artificial, prosthetic, and foreign. At least in part their bodies do undergo a transformation away from female; they cut off one of their breasts, amputating a coded marker of maternity despite their periodic coupling with men for procreative purposes. And after the Amazon Penthesilea, for instance, is unhorsed, "the Greeks dismember her body, as if to disperse the illusion that masculinity can exist without male bodies to sustain it." The Amazon Thalestris, who seems to sexually top Alexander the Great, at least in some version of the tale maintains her female masculinity to the end, but even in her case, this masculinity unmoored from maleness "is something that occurs elsewhere between extraordinary peoples and belongs in the company of the unworldly peoples and activities plotted on the *mappaemundi* and recounted in Mandeville's *Travels*." While Lochrie's conception of Amazonian female masculinity may have some traction in the imaginary realm, in the medieval mindset, it seems confined specifically to the otherworld, conceived as something not only alien but put-on, non-innate, and ultimately unsustainable. (Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 115, 138.)

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Joyce E. Salisbury's discussion of the sex-gender amalgam, in which she seems to use the term *sexuality* consistently to mean "sexual behavior" generally, "Gendered Sexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1696, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 81–102.

of sexuality would be the same as ours.<sup>27</sup> Her mention that medieval people may indeed have had a concept of sexuality, thus implicitly independent of their concept of sexed bodies and gender expression, evidences a terminological contrast between how she uses *sexuality* in this context and how she employs it when discussing the inseparability of sexuality from sex and gender. Even Sedgwick herself seems to slip at times in the very book where she is attentive to the separability of erotic orientation from sexed bodies.<sup>28</sup> The slippage from *sexual (erotic) orientation* to *sexuality* is thus not universal, but the use of *sexuality* in both senses even within single books illustrates, I believe, the necessity of more frequently exploding our understanding of *sexuality* beyond its colloquial signification of identities rooted in orientation toward sexed bodies.

Exploring such horizons of desire may find a well provisioned base camp in medieval views on erotic orientation, wherein orientation toward sexed bodies was considered more on the level of individual acts and incidents, rather than inherent identities. Modern notions of desire invest genital-sexual orientation within personal identity; as Foucault puts it, vis à vis the “new specification of individuals” that began in the nineteenth century, “nothing of that which [someone] is, in sum, escapes [their] sexuality.”<sup>29</sup> Whereas modern thought on sexuality often regards desire for sexed bodies

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<sup>27</sup> “To dismiss out of hand the possibility that they could have had a concept of sexuality is just as reductive as automatically assuming that their concept of sexuality was the same as ours” Karras, *Sexuality* 9.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> “Rien de ce qu’il est au total n’échappe à sa sexualité,” Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 59.



as a paramount feature of personal identity, premodern, particularly medieval Christian, thought generally discriminated only among sexual *acts*. Sodomy, for instance, “was a grouping of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was merely a legal subject” before church and state.<sup>30</sup> In other words, while someone might in some sense be viewed as an assemblage of the types of sexual acts they participated in, a man for instance would, at most, be seen as someone who typically had sex with other men — there was no notion of such a person as *gay* or as *a homosexual*. Sodomy might characterize someone as a sinner, but it did not identify them as a particular sexual or erotic type. And if it did influence how that person’s identity was constructed by those around them, their sexed body and gender expression would be considered to shift right along the lines of their desire’s orientation. Any sense of erotic orientation, as an identity category, was generally subsumed under sex/gender in the medieval *mentalité*.

This subsumption, however, did not obscure instances of same-genital desire from the medieval eye. Not conceived as a set of orientations or preferences, sexed classification was generated in terms of acts. Sexual intercourse itself was understood not so much as something that two people did together, but rather as a set of acts performed by one body on another. Consequently, societal — and religious — determinations of what sexual acts were proper and improper were not, in essential terms, about who had sex with whom but about who performed what acts.<sup>31</sup> Any notion of non-heterosexuality

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<sup>30</sup> “...était un type d’actes interdits; leur auteur n’en était que le sujet juridique,” *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Karras, *Sexuality*, 23.

that medieval people had inherited not in someone's identity but in the acts that they performed and with whom. A man who had sex with another man would not have been thought of and condemned as gay; instead, the same-sex acts he performed with other men were condemned as sodomy. Moreover, same-sex acts were often considered a sin to which everyone was susceptible given the proper circumstances.<sup>32</sup> Excessive indulgence in food, for instance, was thought to induce excess sexual desire that could lead to same-sex sexual acts, particularly in cloistered settings.<sup>33</sup> And while there are cases in which it seems as though trends in sexual desire were acknowledged, by and large it was sexual acts, not identities, on which medieval people founded their categories of same-sex desire.<sup>34</sup>

Even in the context of such acts, though, it would be a stretch to say that in most cases medieval Christians understood those who performed non-heterosexual acts as standing apart in a discrete group. Sodomy, it is important to remember, was a far broader category than modern colloquial use allows; it was not limited to anal sex, although it was used with that specific meaning. "Sodomy" could delineate the nigh-unto infinite list of sex acts that fell outside of what was considered natural within God's Creation;

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>33</sup> Michelle M. Sauer, "Uncovering Difference: Encoded Homoerotic Anxiety within Christian Eremitic Tradition in Medieval England," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19.1 (January 2010): 133–152; see esp. 144 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Karras, *Sexuality* 136, 139 ff.

procreative sex was the only natural, acceptable practice.<sup>35</sup> Even then, many sex acts that were procreative were viewed as unnatural, including vaginal penetration from behind, and any position involving a woman on top.<sup>36</sup> This binary division, between what was natural and unnatural according to God's Creation, ultimately governed medieval views of sexual expression, not whether or not the acts were between two people with different genitalia or not.

Same-sex acts were among some of the most strictly punished sexual sins in manuals that dictated courses of penance, but, even then, they were just that — *among* the most strictly censured, dominating the penitentials neither in quantity nor severity. In the English Penitential of Theodore, for instance, only 3.5 percent of the clauses in the document concern same-sex transgressions.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, courses of penance for “unnatural” same-genital acts were by no means harsher than those for many other sinful acts. In doling out the number of years of penance appropriate for various same-sex sexual offenses, Theodore dictates durations equal to, or even less than, those for other sins such as incest, fornication, infanticide, perjury in a church, adultery, “persistent” theft, or homicide.<sup>38</sup> He dictates, for instance, a penance of fifteen years' fasting both for

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<sup>35</sup> Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 76.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1955), 101.

<sup>38</sup> Bailey, *Homosexuality*, 105–06. See also Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 40.

“fornication” between a mother and son, and for “fornication” between two “natural brothers.”<sup>39</sup> In this case, then, the same-genital act bears no more punishment than the opposite-genital act. Moreover, “fornication” between two unrelated “effeminate males” is assigned only ten years’ fasting, half again as much as an incestuous opposite-genital act.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, discussion of penance for same-genital sex acts were generally not even collected into unified sections: in penitential manuals, clauses on same-genital acts often appear non-discretely among those on other sinful sexual acts.<sup>41</sup> Thus, while certainly sometimes among the gravest of sins, homogenital sexual acts were not necessarily perceived as categorically different from other “unnatural” behavior. The essential quality that made them reprobate in medieval Christian culture was not that they constituted sexual involvement between or among individuals of the same genitals, *per se*, but that they were acts that did not accord with God’s “natural” creation.<sup>42</sup>

The basis of medieval understandings of sexuality, even with regard to a *homos* of genitals, then, was spiritual, not corporeal. Dominant medieval views of what was acceptable or deviant relied on the idealizations of theologically delineated notions of

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<sup>39</sup> Allen J. Frantzen, “Sex: Male-Female,” *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: a Cultural Database* <<http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/?p=sexmafe>>, accessed 22 September, 2017. Allen J. Frantzen, “Sex: Same-Sex,” *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: a Cultural Database* <<http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/?p=sexsame>>, accessed 22 September, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, the entries under “Of fornication” in “The So-called Roman Penitential of Halitgar,” composed by the eponymous bishop of Camrai, c. 830, in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: a Translation of the Principle “libri poenitentiales” and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 302 ff.

<sup>42</sup> See also Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 51–53.

“Nature,” not on what was “normal.”<sup>43</sup> The categorization of what acts were idealized as socially acceptable certainly closely resembles what we would today call normative, but that social categorization was ultimately based on theological notions of the natural.<sup>44</sup> Sinful behavior was considered commonplace, even expected and unavoidable, in humans, but that pervasion of behavior did nothing to establish a normative sense of what was proper. Social ideals were dictated by consideration of whether acts were divinely natural, rather than by regard for which behaviors a “normal,” average population enacted.

Highlighting the importance to the medieval Christian of what was natural and unnatural, harmonious and discordant with God’s creation, Karma Lochrie uses the term “heterosynchrasies” to describe the myriad practices and desires opposed to natural, procreative sex yet still enacted by medieval people. As Lochrie establishes, the term has much utility in moving away from the anachronistic notion that there was a sense of erotic or even sexual normativity in the Middle Ages or that it was governed by any notion of heterosexuality as a dominant identity; instead, heterosynchrasies are

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<sup>43</sup> See Lochrie, *Heterosynchrasies* xxii ff., and chapter 1, “Have We Ever Been Normal?”

<sup>44</sup> I run partially counter to Lochrie’s assertion, where she argues that “[d]esire for someone of the opposite sex in medieval nature-speak is natural in the corrupted sense of resulting from the Fall, but it is not in any sense legitimated by its widespread practice or idealized as a personal or cultural goal” (Lochrie, *Heterosynchrasies*, xxiii). I think it fair to say that “natural” heterosexual sex was absolutely legitimated in medieval culture by its commonplace practice, and certainly idealized as both a personal and cultural goal across many segments of medieval society. To be sure, it was antithetical to the goals of medieval religious, but elsewhere it drove the dominant ideal of procreative marriage. For examples of its idealization, one need turn no further than late medieval English romances, which almost invariably end with the lead-knight’s marriage and progeneration. See also Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

distinguished by their opposition to procreative sex (basically, just hetero-genital, missionary position), and delineated among themselves by their idiosyncratic sexual expressions.<sup>45</sup> Notably, Lochrie aims to use the term to highlight the fact that sodomy, a term which for medieval people described so many of what Lochrie calls heterosyncrasies, is not defined in the Middle Ages by its opposition to an imagined medieval conception of heterosexual identity, but instead by its opposition to natural, non-sinful, procreative sexual acts.<sup>46</sup> As opposed to an epistemology of normative and non-normative sex, a binary of natural, God-according sex acts and unnatural, sinful ones is foundational to medieval classifications of sex acts and gender expression.

Scholars such as Jaqueline Murray and Karras following her take a slightly different approach to illuminating medieval categories of erotic and sexual identity, one that likewise relies upon and highlights the centrality of the un/natural binary. Emphasizing the multivalence of sodomy among homo- and hetero-genital sexual acts alike, Murray proposes that in the medieval Christian mindset “chaste” and “sexually active” were categories tantamount to sexual identities.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, when sexuality was considered in purely carnal terms of genitals and positions, sexuality was understood more in terms of acts than identities. A medieval, through sustained demonstration of chastity or repeated sexual activity, constructed a social and personal (sexual) identity as

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<sup>45</sup> Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies* xix.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” 49. See also Karras, *Sexuality*, 30, 57–58.

one or the other.<sup>48</sup> “Chaste” and “sexually active” describe manifest groups into which society was organized: the religious and the lay. These two identity categories were tangible and recognizable because of their statuses in a socio-religious hierarchy: the chaste actions of the religious both signaled and effected their religious superiority over the laity. Their chastity actualized a less carnal, more spiritually focused identity opposed by the sexually active identity of the laity. And any laity who constrained sexual acts to those that were “natural” (reproductive, within marriage, hetero-genital) could claim a chaste identity at least approaching that of the religious.

This binary classification of non/chaste usefully draws attention to two sexual identities that medieval Christians generally seem to have been aware of, even where hetero- and homosexual were not understood identities. Likewise, Lochrie’s notion of heterosyncrasies highlights the un/natural binary, and the diversity of “unnatural” acts, describing behavior and the relationality of bodies to one another. Where Murray establishes her epistemology along lines of self-awareness of sexual *identity*, and Lochrie outlines heterosyncratic sexual *behaviors*, I seek to expand investigation of the medieval consciousness of sexuality along the third dimension: desire.

Importantly, Murray’s categories of identity and Lochrie’s of behavior highlight the spiritual motivations behind whether or not one was sexually active or not, and whether one’s acts were natural or unnatural according to God. The heterosyncrasies discussed by Lochrie comprise the bulk of the potential acts that those in Murray’s

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<sup>48</sup> Karras, *Sexuality* 40. See also 47.

identity category of sexually-active might perform. Those within this identity category, some of whom performed heterosyncratic acts, I believe embodied spiritually inflected erotic and sexual orientations of desire. Just like the epistemologies of identity and behavior that Murray, Karras, and Lochrie illuminate, these desires are essentially founded in the medieval Christian conception of what was natural and unnatural and, importantly, the manner in which unnatural, sinful behavior could endanger one's chance at receiving God's grace. Having a sexually-active identity did not, necessarily, mean a life of heterosyncratic, unnatural acts, but even when wishing to perform the natural act, the orientation that aimed the desire for that act mattered. The sinlessness of a potential sexual partner's soul was of essential relevance to their desirability.

While medieval Christians may not have had a conception of sexuality beyond acts when it came to genital orientation, at least some medieval texts demonstrate an understanding of desire and erotic orientation that goes above and beyond the genitals of the potentially desirable individual. Instead, this erotic orientation operates according to a vector of spiritually inflected desire that I believe could assemble into an identity in much the same way that chaste and sexually-active behavior could. Much as medieval literature, as Murray and Karras discuss, depicted figures with either an achieved or an innate "orientation" of chastity, many medieval narratives portray and idealize characters that express erotic attraction exclusively toward spiritually "clean" objects of desire, and sexual repulsion toward non-Christian or otherwise "unclean" objects. These texts



evidence a medieval adherence to a diacritical frontier of desire that goes unfortunately unmentioned in Sedgwick's catalogue of alternate sexual axes — religion and spirituality.

Whereas less of a distinction was made in the Middle Ages between sexed bodies, gender, and object choice *du corps*, spirituality and the religious purity thereof was quite distinct, as both Lochrie's and Murray's proposed epistemologies suggest. Indeed, at the very least according to the compulsory ideals of Christian piety, the perceived state of an object's soul governed mores of erotic and sexual behavior perhaps as much as did the genitals of the object. Sex with "Saracen" Muslims and Jews represented such a serious moral pollutant in the dominant mindset of medieval Christian society that measures were taken to address such contamination in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which decreed that "it sometimes happens that through error Christians might have sex with Jewish or Saracen women, and Jews or Saracens might have sex with Christian women. Consequently, so that they might not be able to have a further dispensant of excuse for the damnation of deviant sexual intercourse, by means of this manner of error as pretense, we establish that such people of both sexes must publicly distinguish themselves from other peoples by the nature of their dress in all provinces of Christianity, and at all times."<sup>49</sup>

Explicit in the decree, sex with non-Christians was considered a damning act, not just figuratively, but literally — such intercourse with someone of dissimilar faith sullied

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<sup>49</sup> "contingit interdum, quod per errorem christiani, Iudaeorum seu Saracenorum et Iudei sue Saraceni christianorum mulieribus commisceantur. Ne igitur tam damnate commixtionis excessus per velamentum erroris huiusmodi excusationis ulterius possint habere diffugium, statuimus ut tales utriusque sexus in omni christianorum provincia et omni tempore, qualitate habitus publice ab aliis populis distinguantur..." Norman P. Tanner S. J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., original text compiled by G. Alberigo et al. (Sheed and Ward, and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 266.

the Christian's soul, making it an unsuitable recipient of God's grace, and condemning it to damnation. Where the souls of Muslims and Jews were inherently, as non-Christians, inhospitable toward Christ, such intimate contact with them translated this inhospitality into the Christian. The damnation of the Christian soul resultant from sex with Muslims and Jews was the essential determinant of the compulsory orientation away from sexual exchange with non-Christians that is reflected in the Fourth Lateran Council. And while medieval Christians' erotic orientation was doubtless governed by object-choice of sexed bodies, under the ideals of their faith, it was also equally, if not more, dominated by the appositive, nearly-synonymous binaries of un/natural, non-/Christian, and spiritually un/clean.

*Non-/Christian, Un/clean, Homospiritual*

The "spiritual equality of all believers" was one of the fundamental tenets of medieval Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Ideally, this meant that all people, once baptized as Christian, were washed clean and, in the Apostle Paul's words, became "one and the same in Jesus Christ."<sup>51</sup> As the apostle puts it, even the distinction between man and woman is eradicated —

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<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Jacqueline Murray, "Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies: the Male Construction of Female Sexuality in Some Medieval Confessors' Manuals" in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Peter Biller and Alastair J. Minnis, York Studies in Medieval Theology, 2, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1998), 79–93, esp. 79.

<sup>51</sup> "unum estis in Christo Iesu," Galatians 3.28 (Vulgate).

hypothetically.<sup>52</sup> Significantly, this notion of spiritual equality among believers also meant that anyone not baptized Christian was decidedly, spiritually *unequal* to those who had been baptized. This distinction, between those who had, as Paul says, “clothed themselves in Christ” and those who had not, is the most basic expression of the spiritual binary that could inflect medieval erotic orientation. This binary of cleanness and uncleanness, ultimately, governed ideal medieval desire.

The binary nature of this super/subordinate spiritual difference is manifest in the writings of church father Augustine of Hippo, whose late fourth- early fifth-century works held a firm hand on the tiller of Christian doctrine throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>53</sup> In his *De civitate Dei*, he makes clear that the distinction between heavenly-minded Christian and Earthly-bedeviled sinner is a binary with no middle ground:

For we divide the peoples of the Earth in two, one group of those who follow after humans, and the other, of those who live according to God. Furthermore, allegorically, we call these two groups two cities (that is, two societies of humans), of which one is of everyone predestined to rule with

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<sup>52</sup> “non est masculus neque femina,” Galations 3.28 (Vulgate). As Jaqueline Murray, among many, many others, has pointed out, this spiritual equality was little more than unattended theological theory, as women were commonly considered far more susceptible to sin than men, for instance (Murray, “Gendered Souls,” 79 ff.).

<sup>53</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: a Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992), 11.

God in the eternal realm, [and] the other is of everyone who is to undergo eternal suffering with the Devil.<sup>54</sup>

To “follow after humans” was, less obliquely, to live a sinful life, and to “live according to God” was to lead a virtuous life. Augustine clarifies the specifically binary nature of these orientations further on in *De civitate Dei* writing that “if they will never enter into that inheritance, they will be kept in eternal punishment; for there is no intermediate place where anyone who is not established in that kingdom may exist without punishment.”<sup>55</sup>

With “no intermediate place” between salvation and damnation, medieval Christian doctrine of salvation clearly delineated binary categories: one had either lived “according to God’s will,” thus deserving salvation, or one had not. While the doctrine of purgatory suggested an “intermediate place,” of sorts, it was ultimately a layover that still operated within time, a temporal intermediacy, rather than a third category of judgment. Souls that passed through purgatory after death had already been granted God’s grace — they were guaranteed salvation, if not without some post mortem tribulation. Any

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<sup>54</sup> “quod in duo genera distribuimus, unum eorum, qui secundum hominem, alterum eorum, qui secundum deum uiuunt; quas etiam mystice appellamus ciuitates duas, hoc est duas societates hominum, quarum est una quae praedestinata est in aeternum regnare cum deo, altera aeternum supplicium subire cum diabolo.” Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ciuitate Dei*, lib. 15, cap. 1, Library of Latin Texts - Series A <<http://clt.brepolis.net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/lta/pages/Toc.aspx>>, accessed 27 November, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> “si in regni dei possessione numquam erunt, aeterno supplicio tenebuntur; quoniam non est medius locus, ubi non sit in supplicio, qui illo non fuerit constitutus in regno,” Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ciuitate Dei*, lib. 21, cap. 25, Library of Latin Texts - Series A <<http://clt.brepolis.net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/lta/pages/Toc.aspx>>, accessed 27 November, 2011.

punishment in purgatory, unlike that in Hell, was temporary, and, at worst, would endure no longer than the Last Judgement.<sup>56</sup> After a period of purging, detained souls would join those others who had received grace, ultimately maintaining the super/subordinate conditions of salvation and damnation.

Such a strict binary of saved/damned persisted through the Middle Ages well past Augustine's time, and may be found even in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century "secular" literature, such as the poem *Cleanness*, contained in the fourteenth-century, English manuscript Cotton Nero A.x. As well as using paraphrases of several biblical narratives to illustrate proper moral and pious conduct, *Cleanness* allegorizes heaven as a sumptuous feast to which virtuous believers are welcome and impious sinners are not. Echoing the Augustinian model of the two cities, the poem explicitly outlines that only those completely virtuous and free of sin will ascend to heaven. J. J. Anderson highlights this aspect of the poem, pointing out, moreover, how the poem specifically conceives of virtue and sin as cleanness and uncleanness.<sup>57</sup> Use of such language to describe virtue and sin pervades the poem. Descriptive passages, for example, such as "The venom and the villainy and the vicious filth / That soils man's soul within a sinful heart" are juxtaposed throughout with characters and offerings "that were splendid and clean. God

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<sup>56</sup> "sed temporarias poenas alii in hac uita tantum, alii post mortem, alii et nunc et tunc, uerum tamen ante iudicium illud seuerissimum nouissimum que patiuntur. non autem omnes ueniunt in sempiternas poenas, quae post illud iudicium sunt futurae, qui post mortem sustinent temporales. nam quibusdam, quod in isto non remittitur, remitti in futuro saeculo, id est, ne futuri saeculi aeterno supplicio puniantur, iam supra diximus." Augustinus Hipponensis, *De ciuitate Dei*, lib. 21, cap. 13, Library of Latin Texts - Series A <<http://clt.brepolis.net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/llta/pages/Toc.aspx>>, accessed 23 May, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 83–85.

desires none other.”<sup>58</sup> The poem makes clear the same categorization that Augustine employs: those who are sinful will receive no grace from God, and those who keep themselves virtuous will meet with his approval and will join him in heaven.

More than this, though, the poet’s choice to use language of un/cleanness to describe the binary of virtue and sin, saved and damned, casts the two sides of the binary as more than simply two concepts in direct opposition to each other. They are, rather than oppositional, superordinate and subordinate in relation to one another. Ultimately, the super/subordinate relationship between cleanness and uncleanness established in the medieval Christian erotic ideal a hierarchy of orientation by which attraction to someone of spiritual cleanness is superordinate and attraction to someone of spiritual uncleanness is subordinate.

As virtue and sin were conceived of as cleanness and uncleanness in medieval Christian thought, they came to operate in precisely the manner in which Sedgwick theorizes certain modern binaries functioning. As she explains, it is not uncommon to find “that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions... actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion

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<sup>58</sup> “Þe venym and þe vylanye and þe vycios fylþe / Þat besylpez mannez saule in vnsounde hert,” “Þat watz comly and clene. God kepez non oþer,” Casey Finch, trans. and intro., “Cleanness,” *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, ed. Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 103–82 (ll. 574–75, 508). Several other contemporaneous texts use the language of un/cleanness to describe virtue and sin, e.g., Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

of term B...”<sup>59</sup> A binary of cleanness and uncleanness operates in precisely this manner. To be “clean” is not to possess any particular quality other than to *lack* filth: i.e., “uncleanness.” Definitionally, cleanness cannot exist without being relationally imagined as the absence of something else. In the poem *Cleanness*, this is precisely how the un/clean binary is used to represent sin and the absence of sin (virtue). The poet writes, for instance, when describing heaven and God enthroned there that “he shall never see such a sight / who has any uncleanness anywhere on him.”<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere in the poem implicitly, but here explicitly, only those who are *without* uncleanness may join God in heaven and thus view him. Cleanness is the “ontologically valorized” term used to mark the virtuous souls who will join God in heaven. By contrast, uncleanness is the subordinate half of the binary that marks sinful souls. The poet thus conceives of virtue as operating in a superordinate relationship with sin. Understood as cleanness, virtue requires the exclusion of sin in order to exist.

In medieval thought and writing, the un/clean binary and its specifically super/subordinate nature was particularly important to conceiving specifically *how* one would receive God’s grace and “put on Christ.”<sup>61</sup> In examining several devotional narratives from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, Catherine Batt, Denis Renevey, and Christiania Whitehead evince the same binary of un/cleanness that the *Cleanness*-poet used to

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<sup>59</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 9–10.

<sup>60</sup> “to þat syzt seche schal he neuer / þat any vnclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte,” “Cleanness,” ll. 29–30.

<sup>61</sup> Galatians 3.27 (D-R).

represent virtue and sin.<sup>62</sup> More to the point, they uncover and describe a medieval literary convention by which the Christian soul was conceived of as a “household space” that must be kept clean of sin in order facilitate proper communion with Christ. As Whitehead explains, this household of the soul

is constructed as a private yet social place, prone to moral dirt and external contamination, and in need of constant surveillance and cleansing. An appropriate degree of figurative domestic oversight—the policing of the senses and psychological self-disciplining, allied with stringent moral hygiene—creates the right conditions for... the arrival and residency of Christ [in the household of the soul], enabling communion with the divine.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, the soul is a household private to oneself, yet with open windows and open doors, leaving one responsible for keeping the space clean of “external contaminants.” If one has sinful neighbors who might traipse impious mud through the door, one must be sure to cleanse the space if one desires Christ to come calling. As in *Cleanness*, the “moral dirt,” as one half of the un/clean binary, is specifically subordinate.

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<sup>62</sup> Catherine Batt, Denis Renevey, Christiania Whitehead, “Domesticity and Medieval Devotional Literature,” *Leeds Studies in English*, New Series 36 (2005): 195–250 (196). Specifically, Batt et al. use *Ancrene Wisse*, *The Doctrine of the Hert* (13th-century), Henry, Duke of Lancaster’s *Book of Holy Medicines* (14th-century), and St. Bridgetta’s *Liber celestis* (15th-century) as their case studies.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 238. Though the essay was a collaboration, this portion is attributed to Whitehead alone.



A purifying “moral hygiene” creates cleanness by expunging sinful contaminants. A household of the soul that is clean enough to receive Christ in divine union may accept him specifically because of a lack of sin-represented-as-filth. The *presence* of God’s grace, represented by Christ-as-guest within the household of the soul, allows one to ascend to heaven and join God, but the cleanness that allows Christ’s residency is defined as the *absence* of any unclean, sinful filth. Thus cleanness could not exist, and Christ would not reside within one’s soul, without the existence and then exclusion of unclean sin.

While there were various methods of removing spiritual uncleanness once it had contaminated the soul (confession, the Eucharist), as Whitehead notes, preventative measures, via a “policing of the senses,” was the ideal solution. Since, through the open doors and windows of the senses, the soul was a private space that yet had public access, a chief way to maintain an absence of uncleanness in the soul was to keep the real-world environment around oneself clear of un-Christian pollutants. Such an impulse to limit contact with non-Christians is evident in, for instance, the aforementioned decree of the Fourth Lateran Council, where it requires non-Christians to wear distinguishing dress that may allow Christians to avoid them, sexually and otherwise. This pious “yard-work,” as it were, is the driving force behind what I identify as medieval Christian homospirituality. In order to prevent un-Christian moral dirt from entering one’s soul through the gateways of the senses, it would have been necessary to surround one’s clean spiritual household with neighbors whose inner homes were likewise spiritually clean. A sameness of

spiritual purity in those around one was thus necessary for the good housekeeping of one's own household-soul.

On the most basic level, this made it important to limit contact in life as much as possible to only other people who had been baptized as Christian. Non-Christians (as are characterized in English romances such as *Bevis of Hampton* and *Octavian*, discussed in later chapters) had not been “clothed in Christ,” that is, made one with him and thus eligible for salvation. Such unbaptized people were sources of moral contamination. In this sense, less immediately because of their differing religious beliefs and more because of the inhospitality to Christ that those beliefs represented, non-Christians had a “heterospiritual” relationality to Christians. The orientations of Josian, in *Bevis*, and Marsebele, in *Octavian*, to the Christian protagonists in each are heterospiritual orientations, where Josian and Marsebele are “unclean” Muslims, and the titular Bevis and Florent in *Octavian* are “clean” Christians. For a Christian with a clean soul (or hoping to have one anyway), to associate with a non-Christian would have represented a “heterospiritual” act. Such a relationship would expose an individual to the impiety of the non-Christian with whom they associated. The impiety of the “heathen” would sully the soul, profanely translating the non-Christian's inhospitality to Christ into the soul of the Christian. In this sense, then, a homospiritual orientation was critical to salvation. Preferably, one needed to confine one's relationships to only other Christians if one hoped to keep one's soul tidy enough for Christ. In a culture so dominated by Christianity, homospirituality, then, was compulsory.

Even within the Christian community, however, contamination was still possible. Baptized Christians were of course capable of sin and impiety, as volumes of medieval Christian writing such as in penitential and confessional manuals attest. In seeking to associate with spiritually clean Christians, one would look for external signs of internal purity, anything ranging from prayer to almsgiving to, notably for women, virginity. As the following chapters discuss, at least ideally, these signs of spiritual purity were also erotic *and even* sexual attractors. Individuals of clean soul wishing to maintain that cleanliness felt and expressed desire for others with a sameness of purity.

Genitals and gender certainly seem to have figured one and the same in the medieval mind as Ruth Mazo Karras notes, but I find it a terminological slippage to suggest that medieval people likewise would have considered *sexuality* and erotic orientation as inseparable from genitals and gender as the two were from each other. Erotic orientation toward sexed bodies certainly seems largely indivisible from genitals and gender in the medieval mind, but erotic orientation in the Middle Ages, as now, certainly operated along other axes as well. Modern epistemology of desire was of course alien to medieval study of the subject — medieval thinkers did not even know the term *sexuality*. But while the terminology, understandings, and expressions may have differed significantly from anything modern, erotic and sexual expression nevertheless existed. David M. Halperin proffers that “‘Sexuality,’ for cultures not shaped by some very recent European and American bourgeois developments, is not a cause but an effect. The social

body precedes the sexual body.”<sup>64</sup> And while I believe that the “sexual body” played a larger role in medieval sexual expression than Halperin’s statement suggests, I would offer additionally that for at least some medieval Christians, the sexual body, if not preceded by, was at least coincidental with a spiritual body — or soul, as it were. For those medieval people for whom Christianity played an essential part of their lives, the soul seems to have been both a locus and object of desire.

As paramount as Christianity was within the dominant medieval *mentalité*, little, including desire, escaped its influence. Consciousness of an ultimate binary of virtuous and sinful, clean and unclean permeated nearly every aspect of how medieval Christians apprehended their lives. Erotic and sexual object-choice was no exception. If medieval thinkers ever did conceive of hetero-genital desire as something distinct from sexed bodies and gender expression, it seems they would have articulated it essentially as part of a homospirituality.<sup>65</sup> Coupling between one man and one woman was considered in accordance with the natural order of the world as planned by God, thus a spiritually clean pursuit. Seeking a sexual partner of the “opposite sex,” then, was to seek a partner who likewise, homospiritually, desired to follow God’s natural order.

Since perceived orientation was amalgamated with genitals and gender in medieval thought, however, any understanding of sexual orientation, as we call it today,

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<sup>64</sup> David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 416–31 (420).

<sup>65</sup> Much as some contemporary Christians do when presenting homophobic arguments.

that medieval peoples would have had would not have been dominated by orientations toward male and female bodies. While manifold characteristics surely influenced desire, A truly medieval conception of erotic orientation, rather, would have been as guided by the medieval concern for the spiritual cleanness of the soul as were other medieval epistemologies. Where a desire for homospiritual relationships drove medieval Christian interactions in general, so too did it inflect medieval desire, at least among a segment of the faithful.

The following four chapters will, in turn, address the portrayal and idealization of this homospiritual erotic in texts produced or translated into, and consumed in, two concentrated locals in fifteenth-century England. While an exhaustive survey of medieval Christian literature, visual art, scholastic and theological texts, and other material culture would I believe demonstrate a pervasive investment in this orientation of desire throughout at least the high to late Middle Ages, the central Midlands of England and the North Riding of Yorkshire represent particular textual nexuses in which what writings survive contain a particularly concentrated body that exemplify a spread of homospiritual erotic expressions. While Jacques de Vitry composed his biography of Marie d'Oignies in the Low Countries of the thirteenth century, and Aelred wrote his *Spiritual Friendship* only a few decades later in Rievaulx Abbey, by the fifteenth century the former had been translated into Middle English reading circles in the central Midlands amidst a sizable body of romance poetry, and the latter survived mere miles from the personal library of the Thornton family, who in Aelred's day had prayed at the abbey. These two local

literary networks represent concentrated examples of an erotics of spirituality, one from which we might map outward a deeper understanding of medieval erotics overall, and chart forward our own desires and identities.

## CHAPTER 3

### TOO CLOSE FOR CLEANNESS

Oignes, Flanders, c. 1200: A man sits quietly next to a woman. He looks past her body, into her soul. Suddenly he reaches out to touch her hand, and, fixed on her inner self, feels in his own body the first stirrings of sexual arousal.

Such an account is a fleeting episode in Jacques de Vitry's *vita* of Marie d'Oignies, but one that would gain significance centuries and a sea apart, in the fifteenth-century central Midlands. Transmitted from the Low Countries of the thirteenth century to the English coast, Jacques's biography of Marie was eventually translated from Latin into Middle English, and found its way finally to fifteenth-century audiences in Nottinghamshire. This account of Marie's life — at once autobiographical of Jacques's — evinces a kind of spiritually-driven erotic orientation. The episode, moreover, illustrates in explicit terms that this homospiritual orientation could press through into bodily, sexual arousal.

Our record of his relationship with the holy woman survives in the *vita* he wrote of her not long after her death, in 1213. The text, commonly known as the *Vita mariae oigniencensis*, survives in no less than thirty-nine Latin copies and eleven vernacular ones (discussed further below), attesting to the relative interest that Europe's reading

communities had in Marie's life — and Jacques's role as actor in it.<sup>66</sup> Where it was not at all uncommon for authors of hagiographies and *vita* of holy women to insert their own agendas and didacticism into a text by heavily editorializing them, Jacques takes this one step further by more literally inserting himself into the narrative as an important supporting character. He frequently discusses throughout the narrative Marie's relationship with "a certain friend" generally agreed among contemporary scholars to be himself. The *vita* thus presents not only the pious model of Marie, but the model in Jacques's character of an aspiring homospiritual Christian. The focus of the text, in a sense, becomes not simply Marie, but more explicitly than in other similar narratives Jacques's perceptions of her.

By reflecting on the twelfth/thirteenth-century relationship between canon Jacques de Vitry and holy woman Marie d'Oignies that he recorded in his *vita* of her, and this relationship's subsequent representation to fifteenth-century Midlands audiences, I aim to illuminate how homospiritual erotics could determine not only a vague social or erotic orientation, but even a bodily experience of sexual desire based on a sameness of spirituality rather than an admiration for differing, sexed bodies. While the specifics of Jacques's feelings toward Marie will forever be lost through the dark mirror of textual reflection, in his text he represents to centuries of medieval audiences a sensual and

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<sup>66</sup> The Latin of the text quoted throughout this study is from the *Acta sanctorum*, which amalgamates primarily three manuscript versions, that of Brussels, Bollandistes, 398; Vienna, ÖNB, Ser. N. 12707 (originally from the Augustinian Rouge-Cloître Abbey in Brussels), and "a third, belonging to Aubertus Miraeus (signature unknown)," collated as well with several other manuscripts, including ones from Oignies. Suzan Folkerts, "The Manuscript Transmission of the *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis* in the Later Middle Ages" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 221–242 (223).



specifically sexual arousal at the perception of her piety. And despite the centrality of celibate thought and action to Jacques's identity as a religious, he demonstrates a sexual orientation toward spiritual sameness. When he observes signs of spiritual "cleanness" in Marie, he experiences sexual arousal. The primary and secondary sexed characteristics of the object of his desire likely played a role, but no characteristics thereof are emphasized when he delineates his attraction. Spiritual cleanness, and a wish to attain sameness with this cleanness, is demarcated as the catalyst of his desire.

To be sure, Jacques did not see himself as having a completely homospiritual relationality to Marie, in a technical sense of sameness. He considered her pious, even to a fault, while he surely would have described his own soul as wanting some measure of spiritual housekeeping. In this sense, Jacques and Marie had a heterospiritual relationship, or at least homoflexible in its spiritual relationality. The amanuensis, though, idealized Marie's spiritual cleanliness. Where, when it comes to erotic and sexual orientation *du corps*, some contemporary Christian fundamentalists seek to "pray the gay away," Jacques, in associating with a holy woman like Marie, hoped for the homo in his household-soul. He viewed his relationality to Marie as heterospiritual, but sought a homospirituality which might engender in his own soul the cleanness idealized by medieval Christianity. In this sense, he was not necessarily much different from many other men who were drawn to associate with various holy women. Jacques's aspirations toward homospirituality with Marie, however, and his attraction to her spiritual cleanness, actually induced sexual arousal. As Jacques attempted to achieve a

homospiritual state with Marie, the draw of this *homos* aligned his sexual desire toward this spiritual sameness — in other words, a homo-sexual orientation along the line of a perceived or desired homospirituality with Marie.

For a professed celibate like Jacques, however, the spiritual cleanness to which he was so attracted as a bulwark against contamination of his soul reinscribed the very contamination he sought to avoid. As Jacques gained the desired proximity to Marie's spiritual cleanness, he felt a sexual desire at odds with his own aspirations of spiritual cleanliness.

Jacques, in his writing as well as his life, evidences no exception to the commonplace understanding of virtue and sin as a super/subordinate binary of un/cleanness, in which ambient impiety represented a contaminant. In both the behavior he advised for others in his homilies, and his own as he describes it in his *vita* of Marie, Jacques adheres to a belief that proximity to sin could endanger the cleanliness of the soul, and proximity to the spiritual cleanliness of others could serve as a buffer and encourage one's own purity. These two conceptions, combined, hallmark Jacques epistemology of proper spiritual orientation, and ultimately determine his own sexual desire.

#### *Get Thee to a Nunnery*

In his seventy-second sermon, for instance, Jacques advises virgins and young women of the thirteenth-century that “especially these days, certain prudent and faithful young

women, when they are in the houses of their parents [and] among worldly and lewd people, flee to monasteries, which God has multiplied in the whole world, because they are not strong enough to remain in the presence of [such a] great and oppressive peril.”<sup>67</sup> Jacques surely means to promote young women to seek out life in a monastery, but his anecdote advocates such cloistered life as a response to the dangers of impious, external contaminants to the soul. He juxtaposes the piety of the young women with the lewdness of those in their domestic surroundings, at the same time connecting flight from such circumstances with prudence. He identifies such an environment as a grave peril, a danger to the spiritual cleanliness of a faithful individual’s soul. In order to avoid such spiritual impurity, he advocates via this example that those with spiritually clean souls ought to avoid contamination of sin by ending heterospiritual associations with the lewd. They should, instead, enter a monastery, a domestic site in which they may (ideally) maintain only homospiritual relationships with other pious individuals.

And Jacques seems to have practiced what he preached. Just as he advised young women in impure worldly company to seek more isolated, pure companionship, during his own time as a student and then master in Paris, Jacques found both pupils and doctors alike to be concerned with worldly matters in unclean ways, and too-little oriented toward matters of the soul. Reflecting in his *Historia occidentalis* on his early life in Paris, where he was a student and then master, Jacques itemizes the variety of sins with which students

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<sup>67</sup> “...quedam prudentes et devote virgines, cum in domibus parentum inter seculares et impudicas personas absque magno et gravi periculo non valeant commorari, maxime hiis diebus ad monasteria confugiunt, que Dominus in universo mundo multiplicavit,” Jacques de Vitry, “Sermo LXLII ad virgines et iuenculas” in “Ursprung des Beginenwesens,” ed. Joseph Greven, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 35 (1914): 25–58 (46–47).

dirtied their souls: “Some studied merely to acquire knowledge, which is curiosity; others to acquire fame, which is vanity; others still for the sake of gain, which is cupidity and the vice of simony.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, so far as Jacques was concerned, their studies, ostensibly aimed toward the purity of their souls and those of others, were anything but. In this way, he implies an extreme difference between his own cleanness and that of the Parisian students. In them Jacques saw a realization of the kind of worldliness, like that of the lay parents in his sermon, that he advised others to physically distance themselves from. More specific here than the basically described worldly and lewd contaminants that imperiled the virginal women of his sermon, curiosity, vanity, and cupidity detail spiritual dangers — impurities binding one to temporality —that deviate from a cleanness of the soul.

On his teachers and later colleagues, he was more pointed: “As to the doctors of theology, ‘seated, in Moses’ seat,’ they were swollen with learning, but their charity was not edifying. Teaching and not practicing, they have ‘become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal,’ or like a canal of stone, always dry, which ought to carry water to ‘the bed of spices.’ They not only hated one another, but by their flatteries they enticed away the students of others; each one seeking his own glory, but caring not a whit about the

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<sup>68</sup> Omnes enim fere parisienses scolares, aduene et hospotes ad nil aliud uocabant, nisi aut discere aut audire aliquid noui: alii addiscentes tantum ut scirent, quod est curiositas; alii ut scirentur, quod est uanitas; alii ut lucrarentur, quod est cupiditas et symonie prauitas.” Jacques de Vitry, *The Historia Occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. John Frederick Hinnebusch, O. P. (Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1972), 92. English translation from *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907). Vol II:3, 20.

welfare of souls.”<sup>69</sup> Jacques recalls the ultimate purpose of learning within mainstream Christian thought — that edification ought to lead not to any worldly or personal pleasures, but to Divine Grace. As with the students, his academic peers’ sinful behavior represented their spiritual difference and the risk of moral contamination inherent in proximity to them.

Suggesting worldly relationality among teacher, knowledge, and student, Jacques uses the language of vice to discuss their habits. To him, the doctors are “swollen with learning” as if out of gluttony, and “entice” students from one another, suggesting a worldly lust for teaching and learning. And while I do not believe Jacques necessarily here means to suggest libidinous relationships between teacher and student — setting aside for the moment the eroticization of knowledge — he certainly does explicitly juxtapose his Parisian contemporaries’ worldly attractions and actions against those he holds ideal. As he highlights, rather than orienting their uses of knowledge and teaching toward the cleanliness of souls in preparation for Christ, they “care not a whit about the welfare of souls.” They govern their actions in other words, not with a spiritual orientation but with a worldly one. Where Jacques advised others and sought himself to govern his relationality to others by seeking spiritual sameness, he observes them

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<sup>69</sup> “Theologie doctores, supra cathedram Moysi sedentes, scientia inflabat, quos caritas non edificabat. Docentes enim et non facientes, facti sunt uelut es sonans et cymbalum tinniens et uelut canale lapideum, quod siccum in se remanens, mittit aquas ad areas aromatum. Non solum autem sibi inuidebant et scolares aliorum blanditiis attrahebant, gloriam propriam querentes, de fructu autem animarum non curantes, sed illud apostolicum auribus non surdis attendentes: ...” Jacques de Vitry, *The Historia Occidentalis*, 93. English translation from *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, 20.

operating on another spectrum entirely, not so much a heterospiritual to his homospiritual pursuit, but rather a sort of impious poly-spirituality or even a-spirituality.

*Get Me to a Nunnery*

Seeking companionship of spiritual orientations toward virtue, it seems, Jacques distanced himself geographically and spiritually from the sinful companionship of his peers and pupils in Paris. If his analysis of the sinful Parisians was that proximity to them was perilous, and his homilies preached habits of homospirituality through seeking spiritual sameness, then Jacques's own life exemplified these ways of knowing and being in the world. Not unlike the prudent and faithful young women of his homily, he found a more virtuous, homospiritual relationality with Marie, in distant Oignies.

For her part, Marie had been born around 1170 to a noble family in Nivelles, in Liege.<sup>70</sup> According to Jacques's account, she exhibited an extreme piety even as a child, something she refused to give up as she grew. Married at the age of 14 to Jean de Nivelles, Marie convinced her husband of the value of celibate marriage, after which she began work tending to lepers. In Oignies, she developed a considerable following and by 1208 word of her particular piety had spread, attracting Jacques to her company.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "General Introduction" in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 3–30 (3–4).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

To Jacques, Marie represented possibly the cleanest influence with which he could associate. Simply being around Marie would not necessarily cleanse his soul — but he describes Marie as perceiving the hidden sins in others and then encouraging them to seek confession, the true cleansing action.<sup>72</sup> As the catalyst of this soul-cleansing confession, Jacques viewed her as an agent of others' salvation.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Jacques understood the source of Marie's spiritual power explicitly in terms of cleanness, explaining how Marie "herself, from day to day, being increasingly washed toward cleanness by the words of sacred Scripture, was edified toward the adornment of her character, and illuminated toward faith."<sup>74</sup> Jacques outlines how Marie's power to uncover the hidden sins of others comes directly from the continual cleansing process that washes away impurities in her soul and creates purity through the absence of sin.

For the confessed soul, proximity to a woman as devout and consistently spiritually clean as Marie would have represented a sure-fire way to maintain a cleanliness of spirit. In seeking an intimate proximity to Marie, thus, Jacques was following the same plan for homospiritual living that he himself preached. His intimacy with her, however, and his admiration of her spiritual cleanness, was so intense that it

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<sup>72</sup> Jacques de Vitry, "The Life of Mary of Oignies by James of Vitry," trans. Margot H. King in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006) 45.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Ipsa... de die in diem divinae Scripturae sermonibus amplius lavabatur ad munditiam, aedificabatur ad morum exornationem, illuminabatur ad fidem." Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, in *AASS* vol. 25 (23 June), 636–66 (655). Cf. John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 77–78.

manifested as sexual arousal, complicating the very homospiritual relationship that he sought with Marie, given his chaste identity.

Jacques, in general, admired Marie's spirituality in sensual terms. He ascribes Marie's impenetrableness to sexual desire to how she had (metaphorically) dried and stretched her body out like a drumskin between two crosses, calling to mind Christ's own mounted body.<sup>75</sup> Even in how he appreciates how she shirks off carnal desire, his own engagement with this quality in Marie is itself sensual, carnal. Later, his desire for her, as he himself articulates, becomes outright sexual. Moreover, Jacques links his sexual arousal directly to his spiritual affinity for the holy woman.

In establishing a point of contrast for her own pious naïveté of sexual desire, Jacques describes how “once, when [I,] a certain intimate friend of hers, because of too great an excess of spiritual affection, took her hand — although [I] was thinking nothing indecent in [my] chaste mind — [I] nevertheless felt primal emotions rising up in [me], just as a man [would have] on account of her excessive proximity.”<sup>76</sup> That, by the “primal emotions,” Jacques meant sexual arousal seems suggested, first, by his analogy of the

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<sup>75</sup> “Adeo autem corpus suum juvenula illa tympanistria, quasi inter duo Crucis ligna extendendo, desiccaverat; quod numquam per plures annos, primos etiam libidinis motus contra se insurgere senserat.” Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, 656. Cf. Jennifer N. Brown, “The Chaste Erotics of Marie d’Oignies and Jacques de Vitry,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19.1: 74–93 (77–78).

<sup>76</sup> “cum quidam ejus familiaris amicus, ex nimio spiritualis affectionis excessu, manum ejus aliquando stringeret, licet casto animo nihil turpe cogitaret; sensit tamen tamquam homo ex illa nimia vicinitate, primos motus sibi insurgere,” Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, 656. While the passage is not explicit that this “certain intimate friend of hers” is Jacques himself, the canon is almost certainly obliquely referencing himself here, as he does, elsewhere in the *vita*, speak of his own relationship to Marie in this way (Jennifer N. Brown, “The Chaste Erotics of Marie d’Oignies and Jacques de Vitry,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19.1: 74–93 74 and 74n2).



feelings with those expected when a man is in close proximity to a woman. Jacques's sexual meaning seems clear, second, because only two sentences earlier he explicitly associates the phrase with lust ("primos libidinis motus"), in the aforementioned description of Marie resisting sin by tightening herself like a drumskin. Nothing comes of the incident, he says, since God, through Marie, chastises Jacques, but the scene is telling.

The source that Jacques ascribes here to his arousal is striking. Typically, sexual arousal for holy women, as described in their *vitae*, is cast as the external influence of the devil, rather than as any kind of intrinsically arising desire. An unnamed companion of Christina of Markyate, for instance, is roused to lust for her only when the devil "took advantage of their close companionship and feeling of security to infiltrate himself stealthily and with guile, then later on, alas, to assault them more openly."<sup>77</sup> Jacques, on the other hand, provides no such excuse.

Instead, he links his sexual arousal specifically to his strong spiritual affection for Marie. This spiritual attraction, an admiration for her cleanness, drove him to reach out and touch her, at which point he felt sexually aroused. Certainly, the event could be broken down into a spiritual affection that elicited a desire for (nonsexual) physical contact, which itself only then induced sexual desire — but such finite distinctions do nothing to mitigate the role of Jacques's desire for the homospiritual in this expression of sexuality. He clearly felt the urge to, at the least, express his spiritual affinity sensually, at which point he immediately feels sexual desire for Marie. Jacques's desire wastes no time

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<sup>77</sup> C. H. Talbot, trans., *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.

in navigating the murky distinction between sensual and sexual. That Jacques insists he “was thinking nothing indecent in his chaste mind” and makes no mention of an external influence, like the devil, only heightens the connection between his spiritual affection and his “primal emotions.” Marie’s spiritual cleanness draws his affection to her, eliciting sexual desire.

As Jacques’s preaching and desire to be around Marie, generally, exemplify medieval homospirituality, this incident of sexual arousal, recounted in his own words, highlights the influence that homospirituality could have on desire — in this case, even sexual arousal, specifically. As Jacques began to feel a spiritual closeness to Marie (an intimacy with a clean influence on his own soul’s purity) his desire transcended its spiritual origins and manifested itself in physical, carnal expression. It is as if his spiritual affection for Marie, and the intimacy he felt in spiritual sameness, became felt so passionately that his desire ruptured the spiritual and penetrated the corporeal, exploding as sexual desire.

This episode does not seem to be an isolated incident, and Jacques’s spiritually erotic desires seem to have been pervasive enough that others made note of them. Thomas de Cantimpré recounts how Lutgard de Aywières noticed that Jacques “loved a certain religious woman who was languishing in bed, not with a lustful love but with an excessively human love.”<sup>78</sup> Monica Sandor interprets Thomas’s reference to “a certain

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, trans. Margot H. King, Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1991; cf. “factum est ut religiosam quandam mulierem languentem in lecto, non turpi amore, sed nimis humano diligeret,” *AASS* (3 June), “Lutgardis Virgo,” 244a.

religious woman” to mean that Jacques had erotic affection for women other than Marie.<sup>79</sup> I think it more likely, however, that Thomas is obliquely referring to Marie in the same fashion that Jacques implicitly refers to himself as “a certain priest” in his own *vita* of Marie. At any rate, Thomas’s almost contradictory language — Jacques “loved... not with a lustful love but with an excessively human love” — suggests to me that Thomas, and/or Lutgard, found Jacques’s affections for Marie hard to quantify. His desire for her seemed to them, apparently, neither wholly sexual in any traditional sense, nor entirely absent of carnality. A homospiritually motivated erotic desire would certainly account for this confusing description of Jacques’s affections.

In the apparently only other study of the episode between Jacques and Marie, Jennifer N. Brown nods toward the sameness inherent in Jacques’s sexual attraction for Marie. She points out that “the attraction was in one sense heteronormative, a man’s sexual desire for a woman, but in another it was profoundly queer—a forbidden (and consequently perverse) desire of chaste for chaste.”<sup>80</sup> By contemporary standards I would agree that there was something queer here: Jacques specifically *sexual* arousal is forbidden given his chaste identity, and thus deviant. But I believe seeking greater specificity in breaking down desire, here, illuminates a different picture. The desire itself, broadly, of chaste for chaste is I think anything but queer in its own historical environs.

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<sup>79</sup> Monica Sandor, “Jacques de Vitry and the Spirituality of the *Mulieres Sanctae*,” *Vox Benedictina* 5:4 (1988), 289–312 (294).

<sup>80</sup> Brown, “Chaste Erotics of Marie,” 80.

Quite the contrary, as I argue throughout this study, a desire of “chaste for chaste” — a homospirituality — was anything but deviant for the typical medieval Christian. Rather, as Jaques advises in his sermon and as is born out in the romances addressed in the following chapters, seeking a sameness of chastity, both for the religious and for lay people, was precisely what one was supposed to do.

Brown moves on to locate the true source of Jacques’s sexual desire in “an erotics surrounding celibacy, devotion, power, and secrecy,” where it is Jacques’s sharing of Marie’s secrets, as her confessor, and the revelation of those secrets from which he derived his sexual pleasure.<sup>81</sup> She posits that Jacques was attracted to Marie in the first place, and used his relationship with God (as a man of the cloth) to get closer to Marie, rather than wanting proximity to Marie as a means of becoming closer with God.<sup>82</sup> While the eroticization of power exchange and illicit relations between the two should not be discounted, that the desire was “chaste for chaste” — that is, homospiritual — seems more foundational to Jacques’s erotic orientation toward Marie, and the subsequent sexual expression of desire. Particularly in light of Jacques’s teachings about and own practices of spiritually clean living, his hope that association with Marie, as a spiritually clean soul, would bring him closer to God at least precedes any testaments of sexual desire, and it is only after he felt a certain spiritual sameness with her that his sexual desire for her manifested — as a direct result of his homospiritual orientation toward her.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 75, 90.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 80.

Jacques's *jouissance* may certainly be inflected by erotics of taboo, secrecy, and power exchange, but it is *oriented* by his desire for spiritual sameness.

While the canon did perhaps take a sort of “perverse” pleasure in knowing Marie's secrets, the more immediate nature of his sexual desire for Marie was, I believe, simply of “chaste for chaste.” In Marie, and particularly as he felt cleaner of soul in her proximity, Jacques saw an individual of spiritual sameness who was attractive at once for the spiritually clean properties they shared, such as dedication to chastity, and for the promise that relationality with her held for the continued and improved purity of his own soul. That his homospiritual affinity led to outright sexual arousal is a bit queer, as Brown suggests, compared to the expected state of celibacy for the religious. That Jacques felt a desire for homospiritual association so strong that it ruptured his chaste mode of being, however, should perhaps be not entirely unsuspected, nor thought of as unfitting. As following chapters' discussion of literary representations of popular ideals will demonstrate, were Jacques a layman and Marie open to his affections, such desire, framed as an attraction to someone of like spiritual cleanness rather than of body, would be not only acceptable, it would be encouraged. Jacques's and Marie's states as ordered and lay religious render Jacques's arousal illicit, but the mode of desiring itself, this erotic orientation toward spiritual sameness, is not only acceptable, but preferable within the bounds of the medieval, Christian *mentalité*. To seek spiritual sameness is even the precise advice Jacques himself gives to others.

For a religious like Jacques, though, the possibility that his quite acceptable, even compulsory, homospiritual impulses could inflect his erotic desire and even sexual arousal has dramatic implications. In sharing an intimacy with a pious woman like Marie, Jacques's desire had self-defeating, recursive consequences for the cleanness of his soul. To have found in Marie such a pious neighbor for his spiritual household should have been a great success for Jacques in his efforts to keep his soul clean in preparation to receive Christ. Actually (or perhaps only nearly) attaining a homospiritual relationality with Marie, however, seems to have had only a fleeting consummation for Jacques. In attaining a proximity to Marie's spiritual cleanness, and approximating a sameness, the homospiritual orientation guiding Jacques's life became so strong that it inflected his erotic desire and manifested itself as sexual arousal. In that moment, the very spiritual cleanness that Jacques sought seems to have been its own undoing, allowing for a sameness of spirituality so close to Marie's and so strong in this proximity that it induced an impulse counter to its own nature. Jacques's homospiritual quest for cleanness of soul penetrated from the spiritual to the carnal, generating a sexual desire for like spirituality that was itself an unclean impulse.

For a lay individual for whom erotic expression (within marriage) was a spiritually clean part of God's natural plan, such an attraction for virtuous, spiritual sameness as Jacques felt for Marie could have been consummated without threatening the homospiritual program critical to maintaining a clean soul and receiving Christ in salvation. For a professed-chaste religious such as Jacques, however, his homospirituality

seems to have been caught in a self-destructive recursive loop. In attaining a closeness to Marie that could help him maintain his spiritual household, he developed an attraction not for Marie's worldly body, but for her clean soul. This affection, moreover, became so strong that it inflected Jacques sexuality, inducing arousal. Unfortunately for Jacques, his avowed chastity meant that such an impulse was counter to his own quest for spiritual cleanness.

*Women's Desire, Desire without Gender*

Truly this was a conundrum faced by other medieval Christians of chaste identity, regardless of gender. Not long after and not far from Jacques's anxious attraction to Marie in Oignies, in nearby Stommeln another amanuensis and holy woman, Peter of Dacia and Christina of Stommeln, were engaged in their own homospiritual relationship. While unlike the case of Jacques's homospiritual attraction, this one was never widely disseminated, it serves to clarify that (1) this way of knowing orientation was not unique to men, (2) these epistemologies of desire were reflected not just in what was described but in how they were written, and (3) a sameness of clean soul, rather than a difference of gendered bodies, was the axis of orientation in these medieval people's thinking and feeling of their desire.<sup>83</sup> In writing about spiritually-based desire for Peter and her anxiety

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<sup>83</sup> Christina's episode is, moreover, a rare account of a *woman's* homospiritual erotics — a fact that might be taken into consideration of its limited dissemination — and survives, as near as we can tell, *in her own* words. Christina's articulations of her similar feelings are instructive both for their greater elaboration than Jacques's on the anxieties about such attraction and, frankly, for the "mere" fact that hers are some of the most vivid and seemingly unedited accounts of a holy woman's exchanges with her amanuensis that survive for us today.

that this desire would in turn soil her soul, Christina considers the story of St. Agnes and finds herself not in the eponymous female body, but the soul within Agnes's male companion. Christina, in this way, vividly exemplifies the centrality of spiritual state to both self-identity and erotic orientation. She finds analogy for her desire not in someone of the same gendered body, but in one who has a similarly clean soul *and* orients themselves toward the same spiritual attractants. I believe it would be presentist to describe Christina as genderfluid — but she certainly felt gender was accidental, not substantial, in both her identity and erotic orientation. At the same time, she feels the same anxieties as did Jacques about how the resultant sexual arousal might imperil her spiritual cleanness.

Christina, born around 1242 to relatively well off peasants, dedicated herself at an early age to a chaste spiritual life, living for a while among beguines and, by the time she met the Swedish priest Peter of Dacia, with a local priest in Stommeln, about eighteen kilometers outside of Cologne.<sup>84</sup> Even at their first meeting in 1267, Peter was immediately taken by Christina's piety, though despite her protests was often very insistent that she dedicate all of her affections to God, not to him. Still during her lifetime, Peter wrote the first of two *vita* of Christina. Evidently, as a hagiography, it

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<sup>84</sup> Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 72.



never gained much popularity, as there remains only one surviving manuscript, and one anonymous derivative.<sup>85</sup>

The real documentary treasure of Christina lies in the many recorded letters that survive between she and Peter. Such accounts, in her own words (at least as perhaps transcribed for her), are an uncommon window into how a holy woman perceived herself, not how her biographer wanted her to be seen (or at least, one hopes, more accurately her own merely transcribed by a man rather than outright authored by one). This is evident even in the contrast between her own writing and that of Peter about her. He focuses his writing mainly on her devotion to Christ as his bridegroom, whereas Christina writes mainly of her patient suffering at the hands of demonic attacks — and of her affection for Peter.

For a reader familiar with Jacques's *vita* of Marie, Christina's writing begins to participate in a pattern in which similar content moreover begets similar form thereof. The holy woman of Stommeln seems to have had many of the same feelings for Peter as Jacques did for Marie. In particular, just as does Jacques, she makes no mention of Peter's gendered body, and instead locates her desire upon a spiritual base, with the same concern for distance from worldliness. She, however, gives further voice to her anxieties than does Jacques. In a particularly illuminating passage from one of her letters to Peter, she says,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 73.

Allow me to tell you something secret which I have never revealed to a living person. From my infancy, I have known you in soul, and recognized your face and your voice. And above all others I loved you so much that I strongly feared that, because of this [love], some tribulation of temptation was destined to rise up in me. Never indeed in my prayers was I able to separate your person from my concentration; in fact, I always prayed as much for you as for me. And in all my tribulations I always had you for a consort. And when for the greatest number of times I suppliantly sought before God whether he was the cause of this, on St. Agnes's Day it was certified. For upon my communion a ring was visibly given to me, and marked on my finger. And when you greeted me for the first time, and I first saw you, I discerned your voice and distinctly recognized your face, and I was greatly amazed.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "Rem tibi secretam prodam, quam numquam homini viventi revelavi. Ab infantia mea vos cognovi in spiritu, et faciem et vocem discrevi, et plus vos omnibus hominibus dilexi; in tantum quod vehementer timui, quod de hoc mihi aliqua tribulatio tentationis deberet pro tempore insurgere. Numquam enim in oratione mea potui vestram personam ab intentione mea separare, quin tantum pro vobis quantum pro me orarem, et in omnibus tribulationibus meis vos semper habui consortem. Et cum hujus causam apud Deum suppliciter investigarem, an ab eo esset, per plurimum temporis; in die B. Agnetis de hoc fui certificata. Nam in Communione mea datus mihi fuit visibiliter annulus, et in digito meo insignitus. Et quando vos primo me salutastis, et ego vos primo vidi, vocem tuam discrevi, faciem tuam distincte recognovi, et plurimum stupefacta sum," Peter of Dacia, *Vita Christinae Stumbelesensis*, ed. Johannes Paulson (Göteborg: Wettergren and Kerber, 1896), 278. Cf. *AASS* June 4, 326 and Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, 85. For further extant records of Christina and Peter's relationship, see also Peter of Dacia, *De Gratia naturam ditante sive de virtutibus Christinae Stumbelesensis*, ed. Monika Asztalos (Stockolm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1982) and Johannes Paulson, ed., *In Tertiam Partem Libri Juliacensis Annotationes* (Göteborg: Wettergren and Kerber, 1896).

I want to draw particular attention here to Christina's mention of temptation. She does not, like Jacques, describe an actual episode of experiencing sexual arousal and temptation stemming from her divinely inspired affinity for Peter, but she does explicitly outline her concerns that such desire might arise, suggesting that even without actually experiencing such feelings, Christina conceives of a very real slippage, or even conflation, of spiritual and sexual desire. She is thus clearly oriented toward the spiritual cleanness she perceives in Peter, and feels that, at the very least, it is also a potential determinant of outright sexual attraction. Where Jacques experiences a sort of panic when his attraction for a sameness of chaste soul becomes realized as worldly desire, Christina imagines the same scenario not merely as possibility, but as eventuality given the same circumstances. She would seem to operate, thus, with the same sort of homospiritual epistemology that Jacques advocated in his sermons and felt in his life.

At the same time, the distinct presence of both homospiritual attraction and anxiety about it in a High Medieval hagiography of the Low Countries besides Jacques's of Marie begins to establish their homospiritual content as a feature of form, a convention of writing.<sup>87</sup> As portrayed in these texts, feeling homospiritual attraction and, importantly, shying away from the bodily arousal it could induce, were I would hazard signs of a properly devout medieval Christian. Placed in religious writing, they also become markers of the hagiographical genre. And while similar though less explicit examples are

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<sup>87</sup> This is not to discount the reality of Christina's and Jacques's experiences as anything more than literary, though certainly it is worth remembering that distinctions between the "historical" and the "fictional" were not nearly so clear-cut for medieval European audiences as they are for contemporary Western ones.

surely throughout writing on continental holy women, they are certainly present in other texts religious and secular, as following chapters will attest. As this type of model for attraction and desire are recorded in narratives like Jacques's and Christina's, they begin to become just as much a model for how to write the hagiographic genre as they do models of actual behavior.

The centrality of this homospirituality in Christina's writing — and its disembodiment from gender — is further evident in the later segment of the above passage. Christina likens her relationship with Peter to a story of a certain libidinous monk, who receives a ring from the spirit of St. Agnes that quells his desires. Notably, Christina sees herself not in St. Agnes, the holy woman of the story, but in the monk, and her aforementioned ring to the one that *he* received. In the analogy, she is the monk, and Peter is the spiritually cleansing soul much like St. Agnes. That Christina is more concerned with the virtuous *female* Agnes as a type for Peter and the tempted *male* monk as a type for herself further evidences that the state of the soul, rather than the gender of the body, was a greater priority in her understanding of sexual identity. She aspires toward a general homospirituality with Peter, on the one hand, and on the other conceives of herself as having a sexual relationality approaching spiritual sameness that she must repress through the ring that symbolizes her closeness to his spiritual purity.

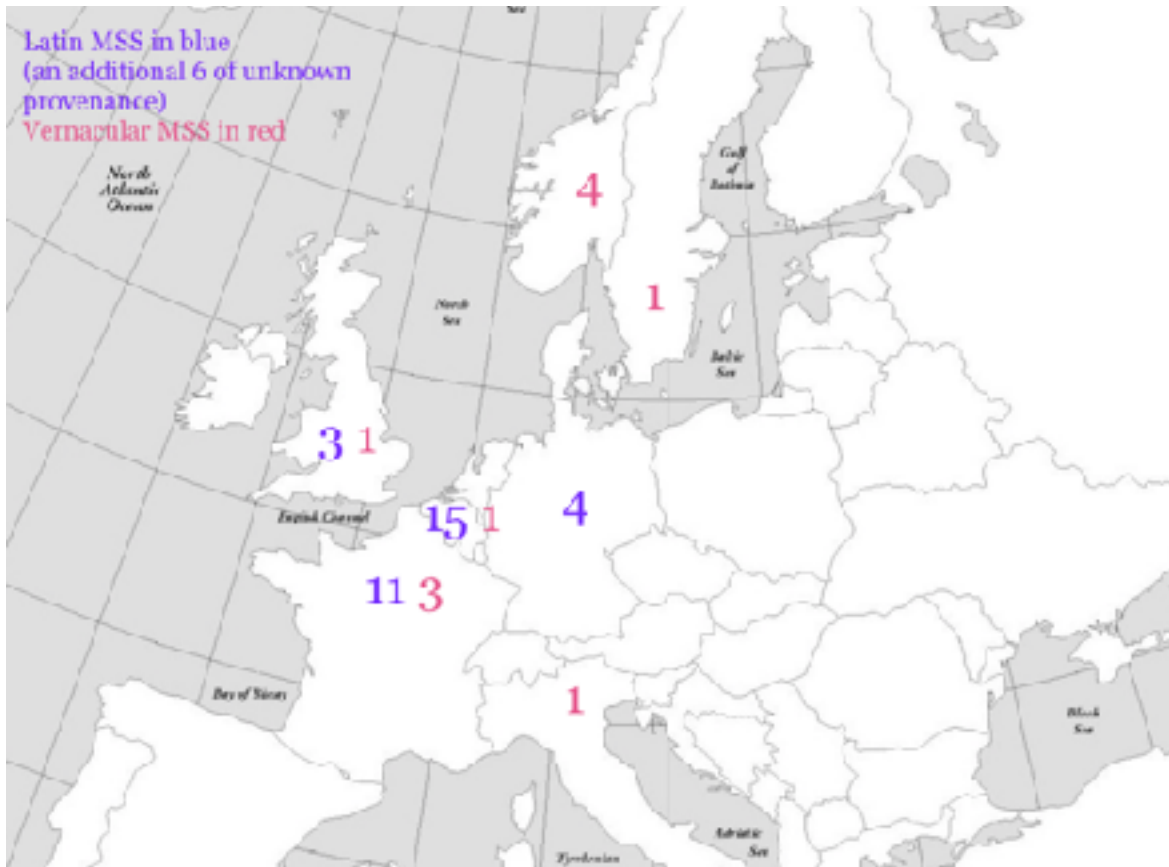
In this sense Christina seems not only to exhibit an erotic orientation dictated by homospirituality, but indicates the queerness of gender to this orientation, where spiritual relationality rather than masculinity or femininity dictate her identity. Christina's

epistemology of orientation via spiritual state rather than bodily form clarifies how other medievals were seeing the world, and seeing themselves, in homospiritual ways — notable, Aelred of Rievaulx, discussed in a later chapter. Insofar as Christina locates an analog to her own homospiritual attraction not in another woman but in a man highlights the *accidence* of genitals and bodies to the *substance* of the soul in delineating this form of medieval erotic orientation. It is not a relationality of bodies (hetero/homo, different/same) that determines the lines of attraction, but the spiritual state, clean or unclean. That Christina sees herself not in St. Agnes but in the monk clarifies that while hetero-gentaled desire was natural within God's creation, and thus party to cleanness, heterosexuality with respect to bodies was not itself the primary epistemology of attraction for medieval Christians like Jacques or Christina. Their ways of knowing, feeling — and writing about — their desire were paradigmatically oriented around a sameness of clean soul, rather than a complimentary difference of body.

### *Translating Same-soul Desire*

As exemplary as Christina may be of medieval homospirituality, however, she may have proven to be a bit too queer for her contemporaries. Whether because they were the words of a woman, garnered only a small local following, or otherwise, accounts of Christina's erotics never saw the broad readership that did Jacques's. That both of their homospiritual impulses could be so strong as to countervail their striving for spiritual cleanness demonstrates, however, just how powerful spiritual attraction could be for the

Fig. 4.1.



dedicated medieval Christian. And accounts of Jacques’s attraction were evidently powerful enough that they were consumed broadly, comparatively speaking, by medieval audiences.

Party to the rest of Jacques’s *vita* of Marie, this account of homospiritual erotics survives in at least fifty manuscripts from across continental and insular Europe, in the aforementioned thirty-nine Latin copies and eleven vernacular ones (see fig. 4.1).<sup>88</sup> After an initial surge in the thirteenth century, dating indicates that new copies continued to be

<sup>88</sup> Folkerts, “The Manuscript Transmission of the *Vita*,” 221.

made at a relatively consistent rate through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>89</sup> This suggests that, more than simply “surviving” through the later Middle Ages after its production and consumption in the thirteenth century, the *Vita Mariae* maintained continual audiences — and moreover proliferated ones.

Over the course of the fourteen- and fifteen-hundreds, the narrative made its way from Oignies to France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway — and England, where three copies in Latin and one in Middle English survive. That a text would make its way from the Low Countries to England is, on the one hand, not terribly noteworthy given the extensive economic ties between the two regions. The activities of the Hanseatic League, connecting England’s southern east coast with the Low Countries, conducted a flourishing textile trade, among others, between roughly the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, facilitating extensive cultural exchange.

On the other hand, that English audiences were interested enough to leave us four copies of Jacques’s *vita* of Marie is something of an idiosyncrasy in this cultural exchange: while *vitae* of Marie and other holy women were disseminated and consumed ravenously, one might say, by continental audiences, virtually no such texts survive from England nor seem to have been translated there.<sup>90</sup> Simply put, aside from local exceptions such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, English audiences seem simply not to

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>90</sup> Folkerts, “The Manuscript Transmission of the *Vita*,” 226; Jennifer N. Brown, “Gender, Confession, and Authority” in *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 416.

have had a literary taste for female mysticism. That English copyists and compilers would bring the text across the channel — and moreover translate it into Middle English — suggests, then, that Jacques’s writing piqued their interest in a way that other continental holy women’s *vitae* did not.

Brown suggests that the Middle English *Vita Mariae* and the other *vitae* preserved in the same manuscript (Douce 114) may have represented “an orthodoxy that, to some readers, would have provided a counterbalance to some of the Lollard anxieties of early fifteenth-century England. This orthodoxy emphasized submission to the clergy and the Church hierarchy through the discipline and supervision of frequent and full confession.”<sup>91</sup> This seems particularly reasonable an explanation in light of the rising popularity of clandestine marriages in the fifteenth century that similarly bucked clerical and familial authority.<sup>92</sup> In the case of the Middle English copy in the central Midlands in particular, the orthodoxy prescribed in the *Vita Mariae* would have compelled alongside the publicly observed marriages of collocated romances an obedience to the dual patriarchal forces of church and household.

But submission to authority is not the only model Jacques’s translated text shared with the romances circulating in the region. As these romances animated knights’ attraction to women’s piety, Jacques’s text articulated his own animation at Marie’s soul.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: the Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6 ff. See also James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 499.



And whatever the constellation of forces, the narrative was brought first, at least, to Bury St. Edmunds, and then at least as far as Nottinghamshire.

Of the English Latin manuscripts of the text, the earliest known copy survives in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 240, copied in 1377 at Bury St. Edmunds by the Benedictine Rogerus de Hunedone.<sup>93</sup> Another copy is retained in London, British Library, MS Harley 4725, dated sometime during the thirteenth or fourteenth century.<sup>94</sup> The third and latest, the first item in Oxford, St. John's College, MS 182, was copied sometime between 1463 and 1474 by the Carthusian John Blacman, a confessor of Henry VI.<sup>95</sup> These mere three manuscripts alone represent a remarkable interest in Jacques's narrative, given the overall absence of holy women's narratives in England. That the *Vita Mariae* acquired an intertextual life in England — Margery of Kempe notes that her own amanuensis had read it — testifies to a certain idiosyncratic allure that the text held for at least certain English audiences.<sup>96</sup>

More remarkable, still, is the *Vita Mariae*'s translation into the central Midlands, and into Middle English. Important to deepening our understanding of erotic ideals in the central Midlands, this sole Middle English translation survives from a Carthusian house,

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<sup>93</sup> Folkerts, "The Manuscript Transmission of the *Vita*," 223.

<sup>94</sup> See *A catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum: With Indexes of Persons, Places, and Matters*, III (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973), p. 196.

<sup>95</sup> See Patricia Deery Kurtz, 'Mary of Oignies, Christine the Marvelous, and the Medieval Heresy', *Mystics Quarterly*, 14.4 (1988), 186–87.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

Beauvale (also sometimes written Belle Vallis), just outside of Nottingham, centrally located amidst the audiences of multiple household romance miscellanies that evidence the same kind of homospiritual erotic orientation as Jacques's. This sole English-language copy survives along with three other *vitae* of holy women and one other text in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114: Philip of Clairvaux's *Life of Elizabeth of Spalbeck*, Thomas of Cantimpré's *Life of Christina Mirabilis*, Jacques's account of Marie and his time with her, Stephen Maconi's *Life of Catherine of Siena*, and the *Seven Points of the True Love and Everlasting Wisdom*, adapted from Henry Suso's *Horologium sapientiae*.<sup>97</sup> The first three texts, including Jacques's, were also copied down into the St. John's manuscript, suggesting that, if not the origin of Douce 114, the former descends from the same original. Douce 114 is, moreover, likely a copy of a lost original translation. Dated to the first half of the fifteenth century, scribal evidence along with an *ex libris* ("Beauvall... Iste liber est domus Belle Vallis ordinis Cartusienensis in comitatu Notyngham") locate the manuscript in the Carthusian charterhouse of Beauvale, just outside of Nottingham.<sup>98</sup>

Evidence regarding the precise audience of the texts within Douce 114 are mixed, sufficing to say that the balance of evidence suggests a mixture of the Carthusians themselves and laity from the surrounding area. The text itself juxtaposes "all men and

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<sup>97</sup> Sarah MacMillan, "Mortifying the Mind: Asceticism, Mysticism and Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VIII. Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2011* (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2013), 109–123 (110).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

women that here read or hear this English” with “lettered men and clerks,” suggesting that the Douce 114 copy — or at least its source — was aimed at mixed lay and religious audiences. Omissions of biblical quotations and more heavily theological sections from other texts in the manuscript when compared to Latin copies further suggest a lay audience. As is often the case, though, the intended audience is not necessarily the actual audience, and while Douce 114 pays pen service to a lay readership, there is every reason to believe that the Carthusians themselves, who often kept tight control of their manuscripts, used the volume in-house.<sup>99</sup>

There is also, though, reason to believe that the Middle English *Vita Mariae* and the account of Jacques’s spiritual arousal within was consumed by a network of literate laity in the surrounding area. While Carthusian houses, following their founder, St. Bruno, attempted to limit their dependence on and thus interaction with the outside world, Beauvale itself, from its early years, faced financial difficulties. Only thirteen years after its founding in 1343, its patron Sir Nicholas de Cantilupe, died, and by 1375 his family’s patronage ended with his family line.<sup>100</sup> Beauvale, consequently, was at least partly dependent on incomes from masses and chapel visits of Nottinghamshire’s laity, opening up, if not their library, lines of religious and social influence.<sup>101</sup> And while

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Cf. Paul Strohm, “Chaucer’s Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual,” *Chaucer Review*, 18.2 (1983): 137–45, esp. 140.

<sup>100</sup> Marie Roberts, *Beauvale Priory and the Martyrs* (Nottingham, 2011). See also “House of Carthusian monks: The priory of Beauvale,” in *A History of the County of Nottingham: Volume 2*, ed. William Page (London, 1910), pp. 105-109.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Douce 114 itself may never have graced the hands or eyes of a lay person, it seems exceedingly likely its source did. The vernacularity of the manuscript's source is no absolute proof that it had a lay audience, but as Vincent Gillespie observes, texts such as those in Douce 114 tended to circulate centripetally — that is, copied from manuscripts in lay possession into religious volumes.<sup>102</sup>

And so regardless of whether Jacques's *Vita Mariae* in Douce 114 was ever known to the same sort of lay audience that circulated and consumed religious romances in the central midlands, it is reasonable to assume that the Douce 114 scribe's source did. In this light, we can consider the Douce 114 account of Jacques's desire for Marie as deepening our understanding of the spiritual erotics idealized in the romances circulated among central Midlands audiences.

While much can change as a text is subjected to the social and personal values of its translator, Jacques's concern for cleanness is preserved in translation. In the Middle English as in Jacques's original Latin, "fears concerning her [Marie's] body's susceptibility to pollution drive her most extravagant behaviours" as the translator preserves both the narrative moments and textual tone conveying that the "mere act of passing through a corrupt environment results in contamination."<sup>103</sup> More poignant still, the particular Middle English words used in translating the episode of Jacques's arousal

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<sup>102</sup> Vincent Gillespie, "The Haunted Text: Reflections in *A Mirror to Devout People*," in *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, Authors and Readers*, ed. Jill Mann and Maura Nolan (Notre Dame, 2006), pp. 129–72, p. 139. Cf. MacMillan, "Mortifying the Mind," 112.

<sup>103</sup> MacMillan, "Mortifying the Mind," 118.

at Marie’s spiritual cleanness not only preserve the clarity with which the episode presents spiritually-induced desire, but explicate the nature of the desire as even more explicitly corporeal and sexual.

The Middle English translation of the passage reads, in full, “Wherfore, whan a famylier frende of hers of ful grete excesse of gostly affeccyone helde faste hir hande on a tyme, thof with a chaste wille he thoghte noon ille; ȝit he felte as man of that ouer-nere neyghynge the firste felynges of freel fleshe.”<sup>104</sup>

The translation is admirably literal, generally speaking, to the Latin (more so, even, than published modern English translations). For convenience, I have reproduced my translation of the Latin below, alongside a translation of the above Middle English.

<u>Translation of Latin</u>	<u>Translation of Middle English</u>
Once, when [I,] a certain intimate	Wherefore, when [I] a close friend
friend of hers, because of too	of hers, because of an immense
great an excess of spiritual	excess of spiritual affection, held
affection, took her hand — although	her hand tightly then, though [I]
[I] was thinking nothing indecent	thought nothing ill by my chaste will;
in [my] chaste mind — [I] nevertheless	yet, [I] felt the first feelings of weak
felt primal emotions rising up in [me],	flesh just as a man of extreme lust.”
just as a man [would have] on	

<sup>104</sup> C. Horstmann, ed., “Prosalegenden: Die Legenden des ms. Douce 114, (Dialekt von Nottinghamshire?),” *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 8 (1885): 102–196 (166).

account of her excessive proximity.

As is evident, the meanings of each bear little variation, particularly through the beginning and middle of the account. In the translator's rendering of the final clauses, however, a few variances are worth highlighting. On the one hand, the translator leaves off mention of the role "excessive proximity" can play in inducing "primal emotions" in a man. This may, on the one hand, deemphasize Jacques's program by which proximity relates to spiritual influence — but on the other, the translator is less suggestive of what reaction Marie's spiritual cleanness has induced in Jacques than outright explicit. While the element of proximity loses mention, the translator yet emphasizes the worldly, bodily site of the feeling, the "weak flesh." More than in the Latin, the Middle English translator leaves nothing to their audience's horizon of imagination: Jacques's feeling isn't just an internal desire, but one experienced bodily.

To boot, where Jacques remembered his arousal in Latin with sexually suggestive language, his translator chose Middle English at once figurative and literal. Jacques's "primos motus," suggests the sexual desire he felt for Marie's virtue that was connoted in his time by "primal emotions." The translator pushed this even further, rendering the phrase with "neyghynge." "Neighing" (as does a horse) on the one hand means, literally, *approaching* — in essence the Middle English translator here captures Jacques's concern for proximity in the very word used to render the desire itself. More than this, though, "neyghynge" on the other hand served for Middle English audiences as a figure of speech

for human sexual desire, in this sense mirroring the implicit meaning Jacques offers. And, in a lexical trifecta, such a literal approach likewise laden with sexual innuendo could figure touching or handling, grasping or groping. Jacques's Middle English member, thus, isn't merely stirred to feel sexual desire internally, but moves in the flesh.

The Carthusians at Beauvale, thus, and certainly too it seems at least some literate laity in the surrounding region, had Jacques's homospiritual attraction as part of their horizon of erotics. The superordination of cleanness Jacques lived out and modeled in his biography of Marie was carried through into the vernacular version of the narrative that circulated among the central Midlands. In Jacques's relationship with Marie and the heightened episode of his bodily sexual expression, they had available to them an integration of religious praxis with sexual ideals. What is more, whether inspiration or affirmation, this textual experience of homospiritual desire was only one line of an intertextual network idealizing spiritually-induced erotics in the Central Midlands, ranging from Derbyshire to Nottinghamshire to Leicestershire. Gentry and burgesses alike — the literate laity of the region — were actively consuming and copying a full body of romance poetry wherein knights' attraction routinely grew for women's piety, just as Jacques's did for Marie's.

CHAPTER 4  
LINES OF DESIRE

In his *vita* of Marie d'Oignies Jacques de Vitry recorded a clear if singular example of a medieval Christian homospiritual erotic — one that was moreover captivating enough in sum with its text to be conveyed across sea, land, and language. The constellation of romance poetry copied and read in the area of the *Vita Mariae*'s Middle English audience in the central Midlands, then, represented a cohesive force of such a homospiritual erotic being prescribed for lay audiences. Within the comparably common manuscripts of popular reading material that survive in the central Midlands lies not only a sizable number of romances, but ones that again and again offer models of erotic attraction and behavior therefrom that encourage the propriety of homospiritual desire, particularly vis à vis the social conditions of late medieval England. Where all evidence suggests that the manuscripts containing these romances were owned and experienced in the households of gentry and, in the central midlands particularly, urban merchants and craftspeople, the real-world pressures placed on these individuals to marry, reproduce, and advance socially, commingled with a religious ethic of homospirituality. In this context of what we might call mainstream, lay society, then, we might think of this *homos* as the *straight* practice of its people. Moreover, in avoiding deviance from this line toward family and social propriety, the lines of the manuscript page themselves offered a straightening correction.



In the context of prescribed potentialities to reproduce, obey familial and societal hierarchy, and advance in social rank, then, erotic desire and behavior was the means to that end. And while little can be known of a workshop craft master's words to his son or apprentice, wife or daughter, when it came to conduct, we can seek their mirror in the idealized poetry in their household libraries. Romances like *Bevis of Hampton* or *Erl of Tolous*, discussed below, offered models of straightness drawn directly from homospiritual desire and acts to narrative conclusions of the reproduction and social status demanded by their audience's day. Notable representatives of the constituent romances of their manuscripts, these two provide a window into the presence of homospiritual erotics in central Midlands reading material beyond the single, if striking, example that made its way to Beauvale. Their manuscripts, the related Ashmole 61 and Cambridge Ff.2.38, both survive from Leicestershire, most likely both Leicester proper, thirty miles south of Beauvale. Where the idealized desires and behavior in the tales would be compelling agents of straightness on virtually any audience of late medieval Europe, they are particularly so in the social context of late medieval mercantile life. Young tradesmen in particular were under immense pressure to achieve mastery of their craft, form a household-workshop, and marry and reproduce. There is no documentary evidence I have come across that necessarily corroborates that homospiritually erotic behavior was employed to this end in Leicester — but there is considerable literary evidence that it was the idealized means to this end. And while such desire, for Jacques, proved problematic to his celibate state, and ultimately unacceptable, for the layperson,

erotic and specifically sexual desire and acts based in homospirituality slid seamlessly along the straight line prescribed by society toward marriage and reproduction.

Erotic and specifically sexual straightness can be understood as an assemblage, over time, of behaviors and desires.<sup>105</sup> Following queer theories of phenomenology lent to us by Sarah Ahmed, straightness is a series of actions compiled over time that all share the same vector of behavior. For our contemporary world, hetero-genital, erotic orientation constitutes our colloquial understanding of straightness in the sense that these lines are lain down together, in parallel, overlapping and extending one another. In a sense harkening back to medieval understandings of sexuality in terms of acts, no one case of desiring someone of differing genitalia today constitutes being “straight.” Rather, straightness is a lifetime of such desires, actions based on them, community built around such desires, and even practice of legal rights. In this way, just as so many of us are in an ongoing, never-ending process of coming out, others are in a constant process of assembling straight thoughts, desires, behaviors, actions into a “straight” identity. Such is the rise of “homonormativity” in recent years to describe an assembled lifestyle lived by someone homosexual who, nevertheless, participates in “straight” lines of life, such as marriage, childrearing, long-term monogamy, gendered roles, and so on. “Straightness” is as much — or more — a description of conformity or participation in normative or socially enforced behaviors and modes of life as it is a colloquial term, in our contemporary world, for heterosexuality.

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<sup>105</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 16–18, 88.

In this same sense, the idealized and compulsory practice of seeking salvation in the Christian Middle Ages formed the core of what was “straight” for medieval people. Since, as I mention above, even sexual orientation could be highly influenced by the salvific pursuit, sex that was straight because it was between a man and a woman, post-nuptial, with reproductive rather than pleasurable intent, and in the missionary position — and thus “Natural” sex — was also straight because the two participants followed parallel vectors through time and space, both seeking the same thing: a cleanness of soul and an intimacy with Christ. Repro-marital sex between a man and a woman conformed to what was “Natural,” reflective of a prelapsarian time, and would thus keep one’s soul clean in preparation for Christ.<sup>106</sup> It was thus sexually straight in that it followed traditional religious principles and dominant social conventions. But, moreover, such a relationship had sexual *homos* in that it was a sexual practice in which both participants were spiritually oriented in the same direction. They had sex with one another only in a manner which followed God’s natural plan (reproductively, maritally, and in the missionary position). Moreover, they initiated this sex in the first place only as part of God’s plan.

Such sex is a spiritual pursuit in its enactment of God’s natural order. Sex with one another is, in this sense, an attempt to gain intimacy with Christ because it is a spiritually clean act that maintains the purity of the soul, something necessary in order to receive God’s grace and achieve salvation, joining God in the New Jerusalem. There may

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<sup>106</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxii.

certainly be an erotic intimacy *between* the couple — a sexual and/or romantic one — but in another sense the two are oriented not toward each other, but, in parallel, facing outward. Desiring an ultimate union with Christ, they are, in a sense, moving themselves toward God through their sexual acts, as their copulation conforms to dictated practices that ensure the spiritual cleanness of their souls.<sup>107</sup> Such homo-directional sex is an act that imbricates their passage through time in a spiritually clean manner. Along with other acts deemed spiritually clean by Christian tradition, “natural” sex moves the practitioner in a straight line toward God by maintaining their purity of soul. They are, in essence, assembling the actions that constitute their spiritual orientation relative to God.

The repetition of such spiritually clean actions, including “natural” sex, establishes a personal history that furthermore constitutes a “repetition of a certain direction.”<sup>108</sup> Through continued acts that are spiritually clean, repeated acts in a certain direction, one establishes a straight line of behavior, in this case, a line leading directly toward God. “Straight” sex in the Middle Ages, in this sense, was not, fundamentally, about the act being between a man and a woman, with a hetero-relationality *du corps*, but about being an act that was spiritually clean and “natural” according to God’s plan — moreover an act that moved one’s soul closer to union with God. A man and a woman enacting repro-marital sex, thus, were each moving in a straight line, the same straight line.

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 164–66.

<sup>108</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 88.

Traveling in the same spiritual direction via the very act of “natural” sex, they were orienting their sexual practice and desire in the same direction. Their desire for and behavior with one another is in this sense, straight. Their erotic and sexual practices move them in lines that are straight along medieval Christian traditions, and in doing so enact sex in lines that are parallel, the same. There is a *homos* inherent in their sexual desire for one another, in how the lines of gaze and behavior of each, in being directed at one another, are simultaneously and instead directed by salvific hope toward God.<sup>109</sup> In how these lines of desire move — on a personal level, uncurvingly toward God, and, on the social and ethical level, in line with what was expected of medieval Christians by both their religion and culture — they constitute assemblages of desire and behavior that are straight.

Along with actual, sexual arousal for like spiritual cleanness, these homo-striae constituted the foundation of erotic straightness in the Christian communities I consider here. They represent the sexual desires and expressions of a homospirituality undergirded by the straight, traditional pursuit of a clean soul in search of salvation. In addition to the cultural echoes and religious reifications visible in modern, western civilization, evidence of this straightness survives, primarily, because medievals sought to (re)straighten their own culture through technologies of communication. Medieval Manuscripts, in

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<sup>109</sup> Kim M. Philips provides a useful definition of the gaze, specifically in the context of medieval romance: “the gaze serves as a narrative device by which the hero and heroine of the tale become aware of and desire one another, and there is no suggestion that it is always the woman who is objectified by a possessive male gaze. Female characters gaze with equal pleasure upon the beauty of men.” Kim M. Philips, “Bodily Walls, Windows, and Doors: the Politics of Gesture in Late Fifteenth-Century English Books for Women,” in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 185–98 (191).

particular, augmented their audiences' lived experiences of straightness with textual ones, and provide us with evidence of the particularly homospiritual nature of medieval straightness.

As a technology of communication, manuscripts both describe and prescribe the straightness of medieval Christian culture. Elizabeth Freeman has noted, among others, the role of technologies such as family photographs and home movies in “the emergence of a highly heterogendered, middle-class discourse of family... [which] were often harnessed to and furthered the representation of collective longitude.”<sup>110</sup> In depicting straight family living, photographs and videos record and represent structures of family and modes of relationality, ossifying the past and carrying it forth into the future, describing a specific mode of being and suggesting its continuation. But these more modern technologies perhaps have their limitations when compared to medieval ones. For the average medieval family, there was a certain absence of both fully personalized art objects like family photos, which may allow more personal expression than social prescription, *and* mass-produced, loosely fitting ones (mass media paperbacks, blockbusters, etc.), which while tragically effective at social enforcement, tend to leave at least some wiggle room. Where medieval families might gather themselves around a household miscellany manuscript, they were subject to a straightening force that seems at once personal and socially dictated. Copied and collated from popular, socially-inscribing texts, yet often molded, intentionally or otherwise, to the specifics of local communities

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<sup>110</sup> Elisabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 22, 21.

and mores, a manuscript offered entertainment and edification tailored both to what its specific audience expected, and what its local hegemony wished to maintain as the straight and narrow.

### *The Thin, Straight Line*

Manuscripts certainly precede the family photo and the home movie in this straightening enterprise (as do other technologies precede manuscripts), especially for the tradespeople and gentry who preceded the modern middle-class. And much in the way that Sara Ahmed describes a kitchen table as a material object around which a nuclear family is oriented, phenomenologically, in a modern, Western home, a household miscellany in medieval England “might enable forms of gathering that direct [the household] in specific ways or that make some things possible and not others.”<sup>111</sup> Filled with reading material intended for the whole household, from adults to children, family members to servants or apprentices, these miscellanies were themselves material objects that gathered together the household. These technologies of communication augmented their audiences’ lived experiences of straightness with textual ones. Reading texts aloud, as we now believe they often did, members of a household that owned such a miscellany came together around the manuscript to experience the texts within the object collectively.<sup>112</sup> They

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<sup>111</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 88.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

gathered as a group along the lines of the page, in both senses of the phrase: the reading or hearing of the lines themselves on each page of the manuscript drew the gathered household members along the same, straight lines of behavior prescribed within the manuscript's narratives. Through their contents, they directed their audiences in very specific, straight modes of being. Manuscripts were a technology both of access and control — with which individuals augmented their own assembled history and thrust themselves forward into the future.

Where the real-life experiences of the manuscripts' audience members constituted assemblages that established lived horizons of expectation from which they might plot the course of their lives, the literature within manuscripts could offer a fictive alternative — or not. As Hans Robert Jauss explains,

[t]he experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things. The horizon of expectations of literature distinguishes itself before the horizon of expectations of historical lived praxis in that it not only preserves actual experiences but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behavior for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 41.



A literary narrative may thus be, on the one hand, a descriptive text that “preserves the actual experiences” of its audience by reflecting the culture of the world around them.<sup>114</sup> Literary texts may also, as Jauss says, act as exempla by creating fictive encounters that expose an audience to “new desires, claims, and goals,” and thereby broaden its horizon of experiences.<sup>115</sup> Jauss here identifies the ability of a text to expose its audience to a “new perception of things” through a literary horizon of expectations that differs from its audience’s lived experiences.

Jauss does not discuss, however, the other dialectic potential between literature and audience that comes with the possibility of communicating new ideas and experiences. While he mentions the ability of literature to record history, and its potential to, through fictive encounters, expose audiences to new horizons unlike anything with which they are familiar, he does not allude to the potential function that synthesizes the two. Literary narratives, such as were contained in miscellanies like Ashmole 61 and Cambridge 2.38, could preserve actual experiences not in the sense Jauss seems to have meant (the recording of history), but in the sense of encouraging the reproduction of an audience’s previous experiences through prescriptive, fictive experiences. By encouraging a particular mode of living reflective of the real lives of household manuscripts’ audiences, the narratives within the manuscripts preserved the straight,

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

homospiritually erotic behavior central to traditional medieval living not merely by recording real models of it, but by encouraging its continuation through fictive horizons of expectation.

As members of a household that owned such a manuscript gathered themselves around the material object, the object itself, as a medium for the texts within, gathered the members of the household along lines of continued being. Read or heard aloud, the literary narratives within the manuscript functioned as cybernetic memories, in a technical sense. Audiences' own memories, and narrative emerging from the technology of the book, merged to provide synthetic experiences which were then incorporated with real ones. Fictive experiences augmented the lived horizon of expectation. Were an audience member already living a straight, homospiritually erotic life, the contents of these manuscripts would serve to extend and reinforce the straight lines of their living. For the audience member whose line of life wended, wavered, or otherwise deviated from the straight, Christian practice of same-soul desire, these texts offered a corrective force. Through the act of reading or hearing the texts in these manuscripts, audiences who had wavered from a straight line of living would imbricate fictive straight experiences on top of their real-life deviating ones. Given convincing enough straight fictions, and/or sufficiently amassed assemblages of fictive straightnesses, deviant audiences could be, by the line on the page, realigned to the compulsory, idealized straight line of idealized Christian homospiritual desire.

As this chapter will detail, the manuscripts containing *Erle of Toulous* and *Bevis of Hampton*, and other manuscripts like them, function in a phenomenological sense to align, and realign, their audiences to straight lines of socially compulsory behavior — particularly when it comes to erotic behavior. Of the several surviving miscellanies, Ashmole 61 and Cambridge 2.38 offer comparatively crystalized pictures of how manuscripts could straighten living within the households they occupied, because we know so much about their material context. Like any household miscellany, Ashmole 61 and Cambridge 2.38 drew these narrative memories together with those of their audiences, forming a material nexus between the two. Through the lines of text on their pages, they acted to trace lines of being from the tales within into those lived by their audiences. Their readers and listeners would have converged not only literally as they consumed it, huddled around the leaves or convened to listen, but also ontologically as their modes of being straightened into alignment with those espoused by the romances within. Reading the manuscripts' texts in their particular household context materializes the meaning of the narrative by laying didactic, straight narrative lines over deviant ones in their audiences. Young tradesmen exposed to these straightening agents, cut off from traditional modes of social behavior that were yet enforced, sought expressions of masculinity that deviated both from the straight traditions of their masters, as well as from the corrective lines within the manuscripts.

Read in light of the compulsory behavior that predominated the mercantile culture of these two manuscripts' audiences, we may understand *Erl of Tolous*, for instance, as a

text that works to straighten potentially deviant desire in its audiences. Moreover, the text only has this particular velocity *because* it is mediated by the *matter* of the manuscripts. In other words, the romance *is* meaningless without the physical object that mediates it to its audience. Knightly tales like *Erl of Tolous* may sometimes seem a far cry from the realities of this audience's mercantile life, but for aspiring craftsman, the battlefield on which they asserted their masculinity was literally the home-front. Rather than dominating other men through armed conflict, artisans wielded their craftsmanship against other artisans in an economic contest to secure a place in the urban market.<sup>116</sup> The workshops in which these men practiced their craft, importantly, were the front room(s) of their homes.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the home in which they played audience to the tales of battle in the manuscript was connected to or even contained the workspace in which they competed for advancement in their own lives. Even more evidently than for gentlemen, then, for craftsmen the acquisition of a household, and the workshop therein, was the zenith of masculinity. Without master status, it was difficult or impossible to acquire a workshop of one's own, and without a workshop — usually also the household, a man in such a society was unable to attract or support a wife, and the bearing of children. With householding, marriage, and childbearing as core components of craft masculinity, and

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<sup>116</sup> Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 109. Cf. Ben Ambler, "Idealized Manhood in English Household Romances and Abjected Masculinity in their Audiences: c. 1450–1500," masters thesis, The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Riddy, "'Burgeis' Domesticity," 17.

these out of reach without craft master status, mastery became commensurate with full masculine status.<sup>118</sup>

This masculinity involved the attempt to dominate women as well as other men, but it also involved a strict adherence to social hierarchy and obedience of craftsman ethics. An apprentice or journeyman was to remain subservient to his master (and his master's wife, who would often supervise the workshop), seek mastership himself only through the approved channels of the craft, and otherwise limit his behavior to that expected from a craftsman in his subordinate position.<sup>119</sup> Under ideal circumstances, apprentices and journeymen might not have objected much to this model of behavior. In theory, by working under a master in his workshop, in a matter of a few months or a few years an artisan-in-training could develop his skills, create a masterpiece, and open his own workshop, achieving the masculine tradesman "dream."

But the realities of social advancement within the marketplace were far from ideal in late medieval England. While advancement to master status and full guild membership were theoretically based on the development of one's craftsmanship, by the later Middle Ages many crafts had developed systems by which guild membership was hereditary; in order to become a full member of a particular guild, the apprentice had to descend from a paternal member.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, money *was* an object: there were guild fees to be paid,

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<sup>118</sup> Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 109.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 113, 129.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

and the materials with which an aspiring apprentice had to craft his *chief-d'œuvre* could be quite costly.<sup>121</sup> Such obstacles often left apprentices and journeymen in a state of perpetual minority, unable to become a master craftsman and achieve full masculinity in the eyes of their community. If a young artisan could not afford these fees and material expenses, he could not acquire his own workshop and become a master.

In many places in Western Europe, and specifically in England, minor tradesmen's chances of achieving full masculine status were further diminished around the very time during which they were reading or listening to the romances in Ashmole 61, like *Erl of Tolous*.<sup>122</sup> During the second half of the fifteenth century, the size of many workshops expanded drastically as demand increased and the scale of craft production grew to accommodate it.<sup>123</sup> As a result, the demand for less-skilled, waged laborers who could staff these large workshops increased, while independent, smaller workshops with which they competed floundered in the face of large-scale competition.<sup>124</sup> The overall effect was a severe reduction in a non-master tradesman's chances to become an independent master artisan with his own workshop, the goal of traditional craftsman masculinity.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

And despite the ever-increasing dissonance between this ideal state and the realities of achieving it, the artisan ideal of masculinity did not shift to accommodate the changing nature of the late fifteenth-century medieval marketplace. These factors diminished their odds of ever reaching full masculine majority — at least of any *straight* masculinity of their time. Locked out of the gender that their masters espoused, many young craftworkers sought masculine validation through other means. Some took to the streets after-hours, gambling, “womanizing,” and raping.<sup>125</sup> Craft masters understandably censured these activities, but they also opposed workers’ less socially disruptive attempts at masculinity. In response to the “glass ceiling” created by large-scale workshops, hereditary requirements, and material costs, young artisans who were prevented from advancing to straight adult masculinity through mastership sought recognition as men outside the workshop.

Since waged workers were denied advancement to master status, the boundaries and distinctions between the two groups grew where members of the one strata could no longer feasibly join the other. Minor tradesmen, who might otherwise envision themselves as future masters, instead sought to express their masculinity in other, more pragmatic ways. Apprentice and journeymen workers, in response to their exclusion from the stratum of masters, began creating fraternities among themselves distinct from the crafts controlled by the masters.<sup>126</sup> These fraternities fostered a masculinity distinct from

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 129. As does the apprentice in Chaucer’s *Cook’s Tale*, for instance.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

that which the masters advocated, by which manhood was realized through solidarity against the masters' attempts to control the wages and freedoms of workers.<sup>127</sup>

These young men, in a sense, were gender non-conforming, performing a masculinity that was generally outside of the accepted norms of their society and that was, more specifically, a gender outside of the reproductively “natural” Christian continuum modeled and enforced by their masters.<sup>128</sup> Devoting their attention to fraternal organizations rather than to the pursuit of craft mastery, householding, and reproductive heterosexual relationships, these men followed temporal lines that deviated from those laid out for them by their masters, and prescribed by romances. This was particularly the case with regard to homospiritually-based desire. Beyond the kind of exclusion of unclean contaminants and actors in their lives that Jacques advocated, these men were compelled to actively seek clean companionship. Such imperatives were modeled in the literature of their locality. The knights in the romances of Ashmole 61 and Cambridge 2.38 oriented their attraction toward the pious laywomen of their respective tails, enacting a bodily desire for their spiritual state of a type with Jacques's own “primal stirrings” for Marie.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 138–144, esp. 140 ff.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).



*Plaster Saints, Tommy Knights*

Of all the romances compiled in either of the two household miscellanies that gathered audiences around them in Leicestershire, *Erle of Toulous* stands as a fitting case of these textual, straightening practices of desire not only because it is contained in both Ashmole 61 and Cambridge 2.38 — but because it is likewise present in Robert Thornton’s Yorkshire manuscript, discussed in a later chapter. Though the story has no known source, it is believed that it likely descends from a lost fourteenth-century original.<sup>129</sup> Otherwise, there are manifold analogues written in other languages ranging from Latin to Catalan, although the Middle English *Erl of Tolous* has no clear stemmatic relationship with these texts.<sup>130</sup> As part of the Midlands milieu, however, the tale can be most accurately considered in its Ashmole 61 context, about which we know comparatively much.

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 was copied around the turn of the sixteenth century in the Leicestershire region.<sup>131</sup> The scribe’s identity is less certain than that of the better known compiler of Lincoln 91, Robert Thornton, but Ashmole 61’s scribe did sign the manuscript “Rate” in several places, and this has allowed for some fairly confident speculation as to his social class, if not his outright identity. Lynn S.

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<sup>129</sup> Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, ed., “*Erl of Tolous*: Introduction,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 309–18 (309).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> George Shuffelton ed., “Codex Ashmole 61: Introduction,” *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 3–4.

Blanchfield has done much to encourage some educated assertions about who Rate was and about his relationship to the manuscript. Based on paleographic and editorial evidence, Blanchfield has deduced “beyond doubt” that, like the Thornton Manuscript, Ashmole 61 was intended for Rate’s own use.<sup>132</sup> George Shuffelton agrees with Blanchfield that “Rate’s peculiar habits, as well as his relaxed attitude towards error and his tendency to carelessness, suggest that he was not a professional scribe but rather a reasonably proficient amateur copying for his own use.”<sup>133</sup> The audience of the manuscript, at the very least, then, seems to include Rate himself.

Attempts to identify Rate’s exact profession are inconclusive, but the scribe seems nevertheless linked to the burgesses, those “middle class” members of urban communities typically constituted by tradespeople.<sup>134</sup> Blanchfield posits convincingly that “the balance

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<sup>132</sup> Lynne S. Blanchfield, “The romances in MS Ashmole 61: an idiosyncratic scribe,” in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 65–87 (80). That Rate was “beyond doubt” an amateur scribe of Leicester, as Blanchfield has said, is probably a bit strong of a proclamation, although Blanchfield’s argument is quite convincing, and one I treat as authoritative. Rate’s propensity toward error and his relaxed editorial practices indicate that he was not a professional scribe. Moreover, the evidence Blanchfield has compiled linking the signature to a Rate attested in contemporaneous civil documents is compelling. Of the few recorded Rates living in England at the time during which the manuscript was produced, Blanchfield has found two Rates (possibly the same man) who lived in the Leicestershire region, specifically Leicester. City records indicate that both men were involved in guild activities. These findings, combined with the fact that drawings of flowers and fish throughout the MS resemble the badge of Leicester’s Corpus Christi Guild (religious confraternity), suggest that the compiler Rate is one and the same with the historical Rate(s) who had guild affiliations. Moreover, as Blanchfield discusses, the frequently religious and devotionally didactic nature of the texts throughout the manuscript aligns with the ethos of a religious confraternity such as the Corpus Christi Guild. See also Lynne Sandra Blanchfield, “‘An Idiosyncratic Scribe’: a Study of the Practice and Purpose of Rate, the Scribe of Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61,” dissertation, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1991; Shuffelton, “Codex Ashmole 61: Introduction,” esp. 3–5.

<sup>133</sup> Shuffelton, “Codex Ashmole 61,” 5.

<sup>134</sup> Felicity Riddy, “Burgeis’ Domesticity in Late Medieval England,” *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and household in Medieval England*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14–36.

of internal evidence is weighted in favour of some relationship between MS Ashmole 61 and the Corpus Christi Guild at Leicester.”<sup>135</sup> In particular, the drawings of flowers and fish throughout the manuscript resemble the badge of Leicester’s Corpus Christi Guild.<sup>136</sup> This coincidence alone is not enough to link the manuscript to the burgeserie, who populated the guild, but the concurrence of further evidence suggests a more substantive connection. Of the few recorded Rates living in England at the time during which the manuscript was produced, Blanchfield has found two Rates (possibly the same man) who lived in the Leicestershire region, specifically Leicester.<sup>137</sup> City records indicate that both men were involved in guild activities.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, as Blanchfield discusses, the frequently religious and devotionally didactic nature of the texts throughout the manuscript aligns with the ethos of a religious organization such as the Corpus Christi Guild.<sup>139</sup>

If one follows Blanchfield’s hypothesis as both Shuffelton and I do, that is, that Rate had some affiliation with the Leicester Corpus Christi Guild, then one can conclude that while of indeterminate profession Rate was a member of the burgeserie: ties between

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<sup>135</sup> Blanchfield, “Idiosyncratic scribe,” 85.

<sup>136</sup> It is worth remembering, given the socio-religious focus of this study, that *guilds* strictly speaking were social organizations with a religious basis, not to be confused with crafts, fraternities of tradesmen, which are known colloquially, though not accurately, as “guilds.” Shuffelton, “Codex Ashmole 61,” 5.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

the religious organizations and craft organizations were strong, and if Rate belonged to a religious guild, it is reasonable to infer that he belonged to a craft as well.<sup>140</sup> Guild and craft membership or affiliation does not guarantee that Rate was a master craftsman (masters governed guilds and crafts, though journeymen, apprentices, and even workers could also participate), but it does signal that he was a burgess craftsman of some rank. Beyond Rate, his “family circle undoubtedly constituted part of the audience, as the sanctity of the family unit, marital fidelity, and filial duty are constant themes of the texts.”<sup>141</sup>

In the strictest sense, however, Ashmole 61 may not have been a household miscellany. As Blanchfield notes, “[d]ifferent texts suggest different professions,” and certain texts, such as “The Debate of the Carpenter’s Tools,” seem intended for particular occasions.<sup>142</sup> This suggests that beyond Rate and his household, the audience may have at times included other members of the guild and their families, even Leicestershire at large, including gentry from the country and ecclesiastics. It seems clear, however, that the texts in the manuscript were nevertheless intended for the didactic and exemplary instruction of primarily master craftsmen, their families, and their subordinates. In this sense, the manuscript served a domestic function, educating members of the guild community. Read

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<sup>140</sup> Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 115.

<sup>141</sup> Blanchfield, “Idiosyncratic scribe,” 79.

<sup>142</sup> Blanchfield, “Idiosyncratic Scribe,” 80. I am also indebted to George Shuffelton for his suggestion of “The Debate of the Carpenter’s Tools” as an example of one of Ashmole 61’s specialized texts, and moreover for his correspondence and consultation regarding the audience of Ashmole 61 above and beyond what he has published in his edition of the manuscript’s contents.

to one's self or aloud, in private chamber or public guild hall, Ashmole 61 seems to have served a family of some sort, regardless of whether that "family" was a single domestic unit in a household, or a collection of many kin groups who met in a public venue. The household romances of Ashmole 61, thus, are likely to have been read and heard within the context of burges culture and the behavioral codes that culture endorsed.

The makeup of the texts in Ashmole 61 is broad, with content ranging from devotional to instructional to humorous.<sup>143</sup> As Blanchfield suggests, the overall theme of the works is devotional, often even in the romance narratives, which show signs of intentional alteration, even censoring, toward a more wholesome, devotional consistency.<sup>144</sup> In *Tolous*, for instance, the knights who falsely accuse Beulybon of adultery are "traytowres," rather than "knyghtys," as in other copies. And an expression of anger by Barnard at the Emperor's attacks is omitted in favor of a consistent, level-headedness, while the swearing of oaths calling on the devil is omitted.<sup>145</sup> This distinguishes the version in Ashmole 61 from its contemporaries and those slightly preceding it, such as that in Cambridge 2.38, or the Thornton Manuscript.<sup>146</sup>

In the face of fraternities of apprentices and journeymen who struggled to actualize this deviant masculine identity with accomplishments other than craft mastery,

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<sup>143</sup> Blanchfield, "an idiosyncratic scribe," 74.

<sup>144</sup> Blanchfield, "an idiosyncratic scribe," 66, 77.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

romances like *Erl of Tolous* endorsed the gendered behavior espoused by the master craftsmen. Whereas the acquisition of a workshop-home usually required master status, and craft mastery was becoming increasingly unlikely to achieve, romances idealized a model of masculinity to young artisans whereby social imperatives like marriage and childbearing depended on the establishment of a household.<sup>147</sup> Nearly all Middle English romances, those discussed here only a selection thereof, conclude with the male protagonist's marriage and bearing of children, in a social station higher than that with which he began the narrative. Barnard advances from Earl to Emperor, the eponymous Degrevant, discussed in a later chapter, from Knight to Earl, and so on (Florent, in *Octavian* is a notable exception, but this is itself a negative exemplum, and his eponymous brother himself goes from exile to Emperor-presumptive). In each case, these socially valorized goals are enabled only by the characters' careful social conformity, martial prowess, and piety with a purpose: erotic orientation toward similarly pious women. For the artisan men seeking masculine association with peers rather than advancement through obedience to superiors, then, romances especially endorsed the notion that social straightness and diligent respect for the established hierarchy were requisite for this desired household workshop, no matter how diminished the chances of a journeyman acquiring one were.

The milieu of battlefields and bedchambers in the *Erl of Tolous* may be a far cry from the workshops and marketplaces of an English town, but the actions of the titular

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<sup>147</sup> Cf. Riddy, "Family, Marriage, Intimacy," 239.

earl, Barnard, in his literary environment nevertheless endorse the same kind of obedience to ethics that artisan society demanded of its minor craftsmen, and his path to the reproductive goal follows the straight, homospiritual line. The tale chronicles the adventures of the earl as he battles an unjust emperor and falls in love with the empress. In contrast to his enemy, the emperor, Barnard is respectful of social mores, almost to a fault. Where the emperor defies the etiquette of mercy and ransom in battle, Barnard willingly takes prisoners and treats them with considerable respect, even trusting one to lead him through the emperor's territory so that he might catch a glimpse of the empress, Beulybon.

Moreover, the text is eminently concerned with what is "right," or just, specifically as exemplified by Barnard's pious behavior.<sup>148</sup> He is a paragon of cleanness who, when the object of his desire, Beulybon, is already wed to the emperor, happily remains a bachelor. Barnard does initially resist the emperor's attacks on his lands and falls head-over-heels in love with the empress, Beulybon, but he remains respectful of the "superior" man's marriage and more or less complacently allows the emperor to retain the lost territory. And while a journeyman was no earl, the message seems clearly analogous: a subordinate should remain deferential to his superior, as well as respectful to more general social mores such as those surrounding marriage. Barnard, in this sense, stands analogous to the traditionally "good" apprentice or journeyman.

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<sup>148</sup> Robert Reilly, "The Earl of Toulouse: a Structure of Honour," *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975): 515–23 (esp. 18).

By contrast, two of the antagonists of the story, knights retained by the emperor to guard Beulybon, seem to align more closely with those waged workers who sought deviant expressions of masculinity through the fraternities. The two knights, specifically, maintain a loyalty between each other rather than subordinate themselves to their master. Portrayed of unclean soul themselves, they nevertheless, heterospiritually, desire the pious empress. They are villains who plot to frame Beulybon for adultery after she spurns their advances. The implication of the scenario is that a loyalty among equals, when favored over obedience to one's superior, breeds violence and disaster. A carver, whom the knights trick into appearing as the queen's lover, dies at the hands of the knights, his fellow subordinates; the knights themselves are executed for their villainy. And while their coercive and murderous actions are not condonable by most standards, the episode of their ill-fated love for Beulybon reinforces the status quo of artisan society mandated by the masters: homosocial loyalty among subordinates fostered disruptive behavior with disastrous consequences.

Barnard, unlike the two knights, obediently serves the emperor and respects his marriage to Beulybon, receiving social advancement as the ultimate reward. Upon the emperor's (natural) death, Barnard marries Beulybon and thereby becomes emperor. In the social context of late medieval England in which a journeyman could seek recognition of his masculinity either through obedience under a master in the hopes of someday becoming one himself — or via strength in a fraternity of his peers — romances draw a straight line along the former.



Notably, Barnard imbricates homospiritual desire in this line that, while not so explicit as Jaques's, expresses desire for spiritual sameness as a foundation to erotic orientation, perhaps even sexual desire. At first, Barnard's desire for Beulybon seems more superficially spiritual. Having heard about her from one of the emperor's knights whom he captured, Barnard travels to see the woman, eventually catching his gaze in her private chapel: "So richly she was attired, / In gold and rich jewels. / When the earl saw her, / He thought her as bright / As the blossom of a tree; / Of all the sights that ever he saw, / None had ever raised his heart so high, / She was so clear of countenance! / She stood still in that place / And showed her face openly / For love of that knight. / He closely beheld her face; / He swore then, by God's grace, / that he had never seen one so fair. / ...she seemed an angel of heaven."<sup>149</sup> Notably here, taking the omniscient narrator's focus as cue, Barnard's desire seems as much about his appreciation for the material wealth she literally bears (gold), and her physical beauty, as it does for her spiritual purity. But Barnard's association here of her corporeal beauty with God's grace, and the narrator's comment of her angelic appearance, foreground Barnard's highly consistent approach to Beulybon throughout the rest of the tale.

Barnard's desire for Beulybon remains a potentiality even for him, following his observation of her from beginning to end of her participation in mass at her private

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<sup>149</sup> "Wondur rychele sche was cladde, / In golde and ryche perré. / Whan the Erle sawe hur in syght, / Hym thocht sche was as bryght / Os blossome on the tree; / Of all the syghtys that ever he sye, / Raysyd nevyr none hys herte so hie, / Sche was so bryght of blee! / Sche stode styll in that place / And schewed opynly hur face / For love of that knyght. / He beheld ynly hur face; / He sware there be Goddys grace, / He sawe nevyr none so bryght. / ...Sche semyd an aungell of hevyn." Laskaya & Salisbury, "Erle of Tolous" (326–339, 350).

chapel. He is desirous of her but, because she is married, seems to successfully silo this erotic impulse from his lived experience. And yet, the moment he hears of her impugned reputation (the “villainous” knights’ plot to frame her for adultery), the orientation he feels toward her shifts. While generously he volunteers to come to her defense in a trial, this is *only* if he himself finds her to be clean of soul. Whether for his own sense of desire, or for social compulsion, Barnard seems keen on orienting himself to Beulybon only so long as they share a sameness of clean soul.

Traveling to the emperor’s court, he stops first, like any Christian conducting proper maintenance on his clean soul, to hear mass at a monastery. Taking a meal there afterward, he learns of her true chastity from the abbot, who confessed her. But for the dutiful protagonist so concerned with what is virtuous, as Reilly notes, this is not enough. He declares that he will defend her, “But first I will confess her myself, / And if I find her clean of life, / Then my heart will be light. / Let me go clothed in a monk’s dress / To that place that the men will lead her, / to be prepared for her death; / When I have confessed her, without fail, / I will take up the battle for her, / As I am a true knight!”<sup>150</sup> The poem wastes little time in, only a stanza later, describing how Barnard “examined her, intelligently, / As it says in the story; / She was without guilt.”<sup>151</sup> Barnard quickly

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<sup>150</sup> But fyrste myselfe y wole hur schryve, / And yf y fynde hur clene of lyve, / Then wyll my herte be lyght. / Let dyght me in monkys wede / To that place that men schulde hyr lede, / To dethe to be dyght; / When y have schrevyn hyr, wythowt fayle, / For hur y wyll take batayle, / As y am trewe knyght!” Laskaya & Salisbury, “Erle of Tolous” (1043–1051).

<sup>151</sup> “He examyned hur, wyttyrly, / As hyt seythe in the story; / Sche was wythowte gylte.” Ibid., 1064–66.

declares her purity and innocence to the Emperor and court, attacks and captures the two traitors, upon which they are judged and burned alive. Barnard's desire for a married woman concludes unproblematically, as the Emperor shortly dies of natural causes, Beulybon weds him elevating his social standing, and they have fifteen children together.<sup>152</sup>

While the portrayal of an actual homospiritual desire in *Tolous* is certainly nowhere near as explicit as in Jacques's *vita* of Marie, I am ultimately less concerned with its consistent reality and more with its consistent idealization in the medieval Christian *mentalité*. Since Barnard is himself a mere literary character, whether or not he "actually" felt a homospiritually guided erotic or specifically sexual desire for Beulybon seems an academic question, even in the context of this study. Barnard's idealization of a homospiritual, erotic orientation, however, is explicit, both for us as contemporary readers of history and for the text's medieval audiences. Barnard offers us, first, a case in which appreciation for material wealth and a feminine sexed body are not absent from his desire. He admires her opulent attire, and her physical form. Swearing on her beauty by god's grace, and likening her to a perfect angel are fairly superficially spiritual connections, even if they do evidence his immersion in a Christian mentality even as he socially and sexually desires her body. But, these desires are not mutually exclusive from or exclusionary of homospiritually erotic orientation .

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 1207–1211.

For Barnard, not just his interest in coming to her legal aid, but his erotic interest in her as a potential future spouse, depend on a sameness of clean soul. He is so committed to orienting his life in this way that he insists on personally hearing her confession, despite all the impropriety of a layperson impersonating a monk, and presuming to perform such a sacred task. Barnard, then, will only remain oriented toward her so long as he finds her “clean of life.” Barnard as a case study in a household manuscript is worthy of at least two considerations in this. To consider first, no matter how “genuine” a homospiritual erotic orientation might be for him, he is zealously committed to living it out. His erotic desire is, at most, truly grounded first and foremost in a same-soul orientation. Or, at least, he is living “in the closet” as a heterosexual in the contemporary sense of the word, who is nevertheless compelled by his Christian society to lead a public life as a homospiritual person. It is possible that all his concern for her sexed body when observing her in the chapel signals genitals as the primary determinant of his desire — but this is in a sense moot, since he lives in a “heterophobic” society with which he complies.

To consider second, this serves to highlight just how compulsory homospiritual erotic orientation was in locales like Leicestershire, where Ashmole 61’s audience consumed *Erl of Tolous*. The text does not seem to deny the existence of hetero-sexed desire — stanzas are devoted to Barnard’s gaze upon Beulybon’s feminine, physical form. But despite this, it signals that social advancement, a household, and childbearing follows specifically from orienting one’s desire along strict homospiritual lines.

As a model of gender and sexuality for its audiences, the text enforces a holistic package: in addition to homospiritual desire, it advocates strict compliance with dominant gender ideals, particularly compliance with one's superiors. Through such compliance, the story models that he who adheres to social and spiritual propriety will inevitably be rewarded with social advancement and gender recognition. For the non-knightly, urban audience, however, achieving master status through such obedience was anything but regular by the late fifteenth century. The protagonists of romances being read and heard out of Ashmole 61, thus modeled a path to adult masculinity for their audience that was difficult if not, in many cases, impossible for actual apprentices and journeymen to achieve. Romance was a thick, straight line that the manuscript medium inscribed over the deviant ones of its audience.

As members of a household such as Rate's gathered themselves around a material object, like Ashmole 61, the object itself, as a medium for the texts within, gathered the members of the household along lines of continued being. Read or heard aloud, the literary narratives within the manuscript augmenting the lived experiences with fictive experiences. Were an audience member already living a socially straight life, the contents of these manuscripts would serve to extend and reinforce the straight lines of their living. For the audience member whose line of life wended, wavered, or otherwise deviated from the straight practices such as dominant artisan masculinity, these narratives offered a corrective force. Through the act of reading or hearing the texts in these manuscripts, audiences who had wavered from a straight line of living would imbricate fictive straight

experiences on top of their real-life deviating ones. Given convincing enough straight fictions, and/or sufficiently amassed assemblages of fictive straightnesses, deviant audiences could be, by the line on the page, realigned to the compulsory, idealized line of medieval, Christian life.

We can be relatively assured that Ashmole 61 was a tradesman-owned object, and not, for instance, a gentry possession. The fictive experiences in *Erl of Tolous*, thus, take on a particular meaning, one that would exert a straightening force on members of its audience who were exposed to queer models of gender, such as those in the fraternal apprentice groups, that deviated from straight tradition. Since Ashmole 61 and manuscripts like it were the material nexus between fictive, prescriptive experiences and those real ones of their audiences, it is worth further, phenomenologically considering how tracing manuscripts' own lines through time and space, and the intricate details of their surrounding culture, is just as important to tracking the magnitude of romances' cultural impact as is understanding the romances themselves.

### *Locating, Inscribing Desire*

While *Erl of Tolous* offers a sort of lay, literary parallel to Jacques's dalliance with Marie, and serves as an example of literary homospiritual erotics straightening audiences of Ashmole 61, Cambridge 2.38, and Robert Thornton's Lincoln 91, *Sir Bevis of Hampton* stands out as an instructively drawn-out instance of the influence of homospirituality on a medieval Christian audience's thinking on desire. Over the course of this 4,621 line tale

(rather long for an English romance), Bevis faces the obstacles that have become synonymous with late medieval English romance: seemingly unconquerable numbers of enemy knights, jealous, alternate suitors, and the occasional giant. Also typical of the genre, Bevis sizes up the marriageability of literary maidens in ways that the scholarship on gender and sexuality of the last century has enabled us to easily spot: in looking upon prospective wives, Bevis applies a male gaze to female bodies, expressing his desire for the physically perfect and lavishly dressed forms of the women he encounters.

But while he carefully judges the physical desirability of the women he considers marrying, his gaze is not directed only at women's bodies. He also carefully scrutinizes the spirituality of these women, judging whether or not their souls are clean. Where a wife would be one of the most intimate companions of the medieval man, it was critical that he determine that she did not represent a spiritually unclean contaminant that might soil his own soul and endanger his salvation. Like many other medieval romance knights, thus, Bevis is careful to inspect the spirituality of women, and pay at least as much attention to outward signs of the cleanness of their souls as he does to their bodies. In fact, female expression of spiritual cleanness, predominantly — not the actual bodies of the idealized women he encounters — induce Bevis to active expressions of erotic desire. His homospiritual desire for association with individuals of like piety, thus, is so intense that it effects an erotic or even sexual orientation for spiritually clean women.

In *Bevis of Hampton*, homospiritual sexuality is expressed in the context of the most obvious divide within the un/clean binary, that of non-Christian and Christian. The

basic plot revolves around the quest of the young Bevis to prove his chivalric worth and reclaim the land and title stolen from his father. Exiled from his home as a child, Bevis grows up among “Saracen” Muslims to whom he proves his worth, despite differing faiths. But the fraught romantic subplot with which I am here concerned begins when the daughter, Josian, of the Sultan with whom Bevis resides attempts to initiate an erotic relationship with him. But while she is initially characterized as overly passionate, as medieval Christian texts tend to stereotype Muslim women, Josian seems sensitive to Bevis’s homospiritual orientation, pledging to convert, and passing tests of Christian devotion throughout the latter part of the poem. In its conclusion, she is baptized, and the couple live happily ever after, of course.

The English story survives in six manuscripts whose versions all likely descend from a common Anglo-Norman original, *Boeue de Haumton*.<sup>153</sup> Each is quite different from the others, however, enough that some scholars believe they should be considered as discrete narratives.<sup>154</sup> The version in Cambridge, 2.38 survives in the company of several other romances altogether which were consumed by gentry or, more likely, burghess audiences. Less is known, or I should say, less has yet been determined, about the original ownership of Cambridge 2.38 than that of Rate’s Ashmole 61. To be sure, there is not as much evidence to work with: no signatures in the manuscript appear to be in the

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<sup>153</sup> Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, “Bevis of Hampton: Introduction,” in *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 187. Cf. Ben Ambler, “Idealized Manhood in English Household Romances.”

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*



scribe's hand, although there are two names recorded in the margins in two different hands that Robinson dates generally to the sixteenth century. One is a marginal autograph comment, "per me Robertum," the other a marginal note referencing a name: "Item pd for mystres Beattrine [?] Habeford xs."<sup>155</sup> While neither of these individuals are likely the scribe, each is least connected to if not actually an early owner of the manuscript, whose identity, if discovered, would shed much light on the codex's early use. It thus seems peculiar that the identities of Robert Thornton and Rate have been dutifully tracked down, while those of the Cambridge 2.38 manuscript's Robert and Beattrine (of?) Habeford seem to have captivated no attention whatever. The comparative paucity of knowledge about Cambridge 2.38's original, or at least early, ownership seems more due to this neglect than it does a complete dearth of radical evidence.

Ownership aside, the manuscript's dating seems firm. In their analysis, Robinson dates the manuscript to the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>156</sup> Robinson well-supports this dating via consideration of the scribe's handwriting as well as the watermarks on the paper.<sup>157</sup> Localization is another matter. Robinson states quite plainly that "[w]e know nothing about the origin or early history of Ff.2.38"; McSparran likewise makes no assertions about the localization of the

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<sup>155</sup> McSparran and Robinson, *Cambridge 2.38*, xvii.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

manuscript.<sup>158</sup> Fortunately, however, progress has been made on this front since 1979. Only a few years later, Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin published the eminently useful *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*.<sup>159</sup> Through a linguistic analysis of several of Cambridge 2.38's texts, the *Atlas* reveals that the contents were copied in a dialect specific to Leicestershire.<sup>160</sup> Since this discovery, however, scholars dealing with Cambridge 2.38 have slipped in regarding this attribution of dialect as synonymous with localization.<sup>161</sup> Scribes, in short, had feet.

Fortunately, while linguistic evidence alone may not necessarily place a document, in the case of Cambridge 2.38 a geographic assignment to Leicestershire seems corroborated by other evidence. For one, codicological and paleographic evidence indicates that the scribe of Cambridge 2.38 was an amateur. For instance, the writing, though all in one hand, is not uniform and opens up as it progresses through each quire, with enlarging letter forms and thus a decreasing number of lines per page.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, the unsystematic application of headings and display scripts is inconsistent with

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>159</sup> Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, 4 vols. (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 244–45 (linguistic profile 531, map grid 445 305).

<sup>161</sup> E.g., Blanchfield, and Shuffelton, following Blanchfield's dissertation, in his edition of that manuscript. Where Shuffelton mis-cites his attribution of Cambridge 2.38's Leicestershire provenance, he was kind enough in our correspondence to point me to his original source, Blanchfield's dissertation on Ashmole 61, from which she later derived her article, cited above.

<sup>162</sup> McSparran and Robinson, *Cambridge 2.38*, xv. The handwriting does "reset" to a smaller size at one point in the manuscript, where the manuscript was apparently originally divided into two booklets.

professional copying. As with Ashmole 61, these paleographic features suggest that the manuscript was not produced by a professional scribe but rather by an amateur for his own use. Moreover, wear on the manuscript's pages, especially the outer leaves of each quire, indicate that Cambridge 2.38 remained unbound for some time, as was the case with the Thornton Manuscript.<sup>163</sup>

Thus, the amateur features of the writing and binding, combined with the didactic, domestic nature of the content the scribe copied, make it unlikely that he was an itinerant professional. Moreover, some of the paper used in Cambridge 2.38 shares the same "hand-with-flower" watermark found in Ashmole 61.<sup>164</sup> Given the confluence of evidence, an actual localization of Cambridge 2.38 to Leicestershire seems reasonable. Since (1) Ashmole 61 can be confidently localized in Leicester; (2) much of Cambridge 2.38's paper shares the same watermark as Ashmole 61's; (3) the scribe was most likely a local amateur rather than an itinerant professional; and (4) his Leicestershire dialect indeed matches this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that Cambridge 2.38 may truly be localized in Leicestershire.

It is tempting, although imprudent, to push this line of argument further. McSparran, while unaware of the manuscript's Leicestershire provenance, argues for a burgess ownership that would place Cambridge 2.38 in Leicester proper. She states

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Friedrich Hülsmann identifies the marks in both MSS as Briquet's no. 11194, "The Watermarks of Four Late Medieval Manuscripts Containing *The Erle of Tolous*," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 32.1(1985): 11–12.

unequivocally that the manuscript “provide[s] a good index to the religious and literary tastes and preoccupations of the bourgeoisie in the late fifteenth century,” going on to describe how “one can easily imagine it serving for family reading in a pious middle-class household.”<sup>165</sup> McSparran provides no evidence to support this claim of burgess ownership, nor cites any sources. One is left to infer that she attributes burgess ownership over, say, gentry ownership, because Cambridge 2.38 contains texts such as “How the Merchant Betrayed His Wife” and “The Merchant and His Son.” Out of forty-four items, however, these are the only two that seem to lend any particular interest to burgess subjects, and there is little reason to think that their presence precludes gentry ownership. Holographs like the Thornton Manuscript indicate that household miscellanies were just as likely to be owned by the gentry.

Moreover, gentry and burgess segments of society crossed paths with increasing regularity in the late fifteenth century, and it is not unreasonable to envision a country gentleman including tales of burgesses in his personal library.<sup>166</sup> The apparent shared source of paper between Cambridge 2.38 and the Leicester burgess manuscript Ashmole 61 also tempts a localization of Cambridge 2.38 to a burgess household in Leicester proper, but this is again by no means determinant: where would a rural Leicestershire gentleman likely go for his paper but Leicester? Much like how the Leicestershire dialect

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<sup>165</sup> McSparran and Robinson, *Cambridge 2.38*, vii.

<sup>166</sup> There are even cases of intermarriage between the two groups, as in the case of a daughter of the Paston family marrying a burgess. See Ridley, “‘Burgeis’ Domesticity,” 27.

of the scribe is no indication that Cambridge 2.38 was owned in Leicester proper, that the manuscript's paper came from the same source as a Leicester manuscript by no means localizes Cambridge 2.38 to that city itself. All of this is not to suggest that I believe Cambridge 2.38 *was* owned by a country gentleman. I merely wish to introduce the possibility where previously it has been absent, and rather, simply, to curb previous assumptions that the manuscript was owned by an urban burgess.

The conversation surrounding Cambridge 2.38's ownership before and since McSparran placed it in a burgess household has seen little agreement. Writing in 1976, a little before McSparran, Carol Falvo Heffernan suggested that the manuscript's religious content indicate it may have been produced in a monastery.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, Barbara Hanawalt considered in 1996 that Cambridge 2.38 was a "devotional rather than a household" manuscript.<sup>168</sup> Phillipa Hardman follows McSparran in considering the codex a family possession, but does not go so far as to claim it was in a burgess household, as McSparran did.<sup>169</sup>

To some extent, this cacophony can be harmonized: first, Heffernan's suggestion that Cambridge 2.38 is a product of a monastic scribe seems unlikely. While I would

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<sup>167</sup> Carol Falvo Heffernan, "Introduction," *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1976), 1.

<sup>168</sup> Barbara A. Hanawalt, "'The Childe of Bristowe' and the Making of Middle-Class Adolescence" in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-century England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 155–178 (172). It should be noted that, in her correspondence with me, Hanawalt has said that she now believes that Cambridge 2.38 was indeed a household manuscript.

<sup>169</sup> Phillipa Hardman, "Compiling the Nation: Fifteenth-century Miscellany Manuscripts," in *Nation, Court, and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-century English Poetry*, ed. Helen Coony (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2001), 50–69 (67).

never presume that the religious were incapable of appreciating a manuscript such as Cambridge 2.38, Heffernan offers no evidence for her conclusion other than the codex's devotional nature. Since she was focusing on the manuscript's romances, her proposal that it was a product of a monastery seems most likely simply a product of the prevailing view of mid to late twentieth-century scholarship that, as the literate class, the religious were the presumed authors of any anonymous texts, including "secular" romances. More recent views accept the reality that where laywomen and laymen are the attributed authors of many texts, clerics cannot be the assumed authors of any texts that happen to be anonymous.<sup>170</sup> Adding to this Cambridge 2.38's overwhelming similarity to numerous other miscellany manuscripts known to be lay household possessions, and the focused concern of the manuscript's contents on family life, I believe it a quite reasonable assumption to locate the codex in the hands of a literate family, as McSparran does (even though I am not willing to unreservedly follow her assumption that it was a burges family).

### *Heterospiritual Panic*

Bevis himself, it warrants demonstrating, is quite clean of soul. When Josian's father first offers Bevis his daughter in marriage in an attempt to secure a male heir for himself, Bevis refuses in a reply that demonstrates his first inkling of homospirituality at the same

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<sup>170</sup> See, for example, Helen J. Nicholson, *Love, War, and the Grail* (History of Warfare, vol. 4, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), pp. 9–11. Richard Kaeuper adds his assent, *Holy Warriors: the Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 227n21.

time that it evinces his extreme piety. When Josian's father, a Saracen king, offers her to Bevis on the condition that Bevis convert from Christianity, Bevis replies, "For God's sake! ...I would not do that / For all the silver or all the gold / That is under heaven's light, / Nor for your daughter who is so beautiful. / I would not forsake in any way / Jesus, who bought me so dearly. / All those are driven to be dumb and deaf / who believe in false gods!"<sup>171</sup> Bevis demonstrates his piety by reversing the hierarchy of the king's offer: his reaction is principally to the condition of the offer, not the offer itself. Rather than refusing to marry Josian on the grounds that conversion is too high a price, he articulates that despite the maiden's beauty, neither marriage to her, nor any other offer, would be enough to dissuade him from his Christian faith. He moreover condemns any who would convert. In terms of un/cleanness, Bevis is acutely aware that to convert to paganism would be the ultimate sully of his soul, and completely preclude his ever receiving Christ within his own spiritual household. He thus vehemently protects his own cleanness first, turning down the marriage second.

Josian, however, is not so discriminating, and expresses a heterospirituality (possibly part of a bi- or "panspirituality"), effecting in her a hetero-oriented erotic expression that causes something of a panic in Bevis. Later on after the king's initial attempt to gain Bevis for his daughter, Josian visits Bevis in private. Although she is a

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<sup>171</sup> "For Gode! ...that I nolde / For al the selver ne al the golde, / That is under hevене light, / Ne for thee doughter, that is so bright. / I nolde forsake in none manere / Jesu, that boughte me so dere. / Al mote thai be doum and deve, / That on the false godes beleve!" Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), ll. 561–68. The comment that Jesus "bought" Bevis is in reference to the medieval conception of the Passion by which Christ, through his crucifixion, repaid a debt to the Devil on behalf of all humans.

“Saracen” and he a Christian, she figuratively hurls herself at the man, professing her love and insisting to Bevis, “Do your will with me!”<sup>172</sup> Note the sexual overtones. Bevis adamantly refuses, instead suggesting that she wed and bed a fellow Muslim, King Brademond. In attempting to divert Josian’s attentions from himself, Bevis simultaneously suggests a homospiritual coupling to the maiden; her erotic desire oriented along heterospiritual lines seems disturbing to him. Josian is undeterred, however, and expresses the fullness of her erotic desire for Bevis: “I would have you rather as my lover, / Your body naked of its undershirt, / Than all the gold that Christ has made, / And you would then with me do your will!”<sup>173</sup> Josian’s rather explicit, sexual desire juxtaposes itself against Bevis’s earlier protestations of piety: where Bevis refuses to spiritually soil himself with conversion away from Christianity either “for all the silver or all the gold” in the world, Josian values the sexual gratification of a naked Bevis “having his way with her” more than she values “all the gold that Christ has made.”<sup>174</sup> Such sexual desire, verbal forwardness, and general irascibility were, in the medieval Christian imagination, characteristic of “Saracen” women, allegedly a product of the hot climate in which they were born.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> “thow with me do thee wille!” Ibid., 1097.

<sup>173</sup> “Ichavede thee lever to me lemman, / Thee bodi in thee scherte naked, / Than al the gold, that Crist hath maked, / And thow wost with me do thee will!” Ibid., 1106–09.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 562, 1108.

<sup>175</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 162–63, and 188.



This contrasts with Bevis's reserved demeanor, protective of his body, as the vessel of his soul, in a sort of "demure" more typically associated in medieval literature with the Daunger figure protecting a woman's chastity (most prominently in the *Roman de la Rose*).<sup>176</sup> This might seem on the one hand a feminization of Bevis, a gender reversal of the typical literary associations with this behavior. But on the other hand, it distinguishes Bevis from the "irascible" Muslim men expected by many medieval Christian readers in the hot climate in which Bevis is portrayed; he is, rather, of a type with the restraint, calmness, and protection of piety expected of a Christian man in such romances — especially when exposed to "contaminants" of spiritual difference.<sup>177</sup> In the face of Bevis's sort of masculine "Daunger" guarding his body and the clean soul within, Josian's forwardness is a visceral, behavioral marker of her spiritual difference.

Since Josian is of a different faith, in a spiritual sense her desire for Bevis is hetero-oriented, traversing boundaries of religion and, in Christian eyes, the boundary between spiritual cleanness and uncleanness. She desires the most proximate of physical associations with Bevis, showing no regard for any effect it might have on what might be considered the clean purity of her own soul from a "Saracen" point of view. Notably, such heterospiritual inclinations are not the norm for "Saracens" in Middle English literature. Even in *Bevis*, Josian's own father demonstrates careful concern for the spiritual

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<sup>176</sup> I am indebted to Robert S. Sturges for pointing out to me this reversal of sorts.

<sup>177</sup> Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 162. See also 176–178.

cleanness of his daughter's Muslim soul when he requires Bevis to convert to Islam before accepting the marriage invitation.

Notably, this homospiritual ethic shared among Christian and Muslim alike is not unique in the Middle English corpus to *Bevis*. In *The Book of John Mandeville*, for instance, a Sultan offers his Muslim daughter to Sir John in marriage, but only on the condition that the knight convert to Islam, and bring himself to a homospiritual accord with the princess. Mandeville-as-Sir John states, however, "I dwelled in [the sultan's] court, and was a soldier in his wars a great while against the Bedouins. And he would have wed me to a great prince's daughter [ful richely], if I would have forsaken my belief [in Christ]." <sup>178</sup> This offer of marriage as a reward for martial prowess given in service is a trope common in romances, particularly insular ones, *ad nauseam*. And while the most recent treatments of this episode in the Sir John narrative argue that his rejection of the marriage demonstrates an a-knightly, mercenary approach to his movement through the world, read in the context of homospirituality, the episode itself colludes with the knightly behavior modeled in more explicit members of the romance genre. <sup>179</sup> Josian's

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<sup>178</sup> "Y dwelled in [the sultan's] courte, and was soudier, and in his werris a greet while agenst the Bedoyns. And he wolde have y-weddid me to a greet princes doghter ful richely, if Y wolde have forsake my byleve" *The Book of John Mandeville*, ed. Tamarah Kohanski and C. David Benson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), ll. 448–451.

<sup>179</sup> See, e.g., Frank Grady, "'Machomete' and *Mandeville's Travels*," in *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, edited by John Victor Tolan (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 271–88, es. 287n21: Grady argues that, "on the level of genre the rejection of the Saracen princess by the author [and character] of the *Travels* represents an embrace of his historical and ethnographic project to the pointed exclusion of any sort of romance perspective." See also Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), esp. 112: for Higgins, Sir John is a "*histor*" for whose identity whether, or not, he is a "pious knight, untempted by ladies and land" has no relevance.

hetero-orientated affection, thus, transgresses not only Christian spiritual and sexual boundaries, but what authors in late medieval England understood as a cross-cultural medieval ethic of limiting affection and marital contact to those of like soul.

From Bevis's homospiritual perspective, then, Josian's desire is problematic. Her heterospiritual (perhaps more accurately bispiritual or panspiritual?!) lack of concern with associating with a religious other makes Bevis available to her as an object of sexual desire. In terms of the binary, then, that most occupied the Christian *mentalité* — that of non-/Christian, damned/saved, un/clean — Josian's sexuality is oriented around a hetero-attraction. Or, to press how Bevis sees her, she has an unnaturally hetero-sexual orientation.

Josian's advances, thus, incite in Bevis a kind of "heterospiritual panic." Faced with the almost forceful advances of the spiritually unclean Josian, Bevis declares to her, "I desire no more peril from you!" and flees his quarters in her father's household for the relative safety of an inn.<sup>180</sup> Whereas Josian's declarations of erotic desire doubtfully present any physical harm, Bevis's accusation that she threatens him with "peril" seems to refer to her refusal to scale back her sexual advances, and the threat they pose to his spiritual well-being. Her forwardness is multilayered with uncleanness, at once a sign of non-Christian, "irascible" femininity, as well as suggesting a sinful sexual encounter, as extramarital as it is extrareligious. Accordingly, where he feels an imminent risk of contact with an unclean spiritual contaminant — a heterospiritual panic analogous to

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<sup>180</sup> "I nel namore of thee danger," Herzman et al., "Bevis," 1132.

Sedgwick's conception of a "homosexual panic," if you will — he accuses her of threatening harm, and flees the scene.<sup>181</sup> Up until this point, Bevis has been not only apparently uninterested in Josian sexually, but repulsed by her. Despite any possible latent sexual attraction to her female body, where he saw marriage to (and sex with) Josian as no motivation whatever to forsake his Christianity, and her sexual advances upon him were met with feelings of "peril" and flight. Bevis's unwillingness to see Josian as a possible object of sexual desire has been determined by his homospirituality.

As a literary archetype, Bevis represents the ideal, "natural" homospiritual perspective. For the historical Middle Ages, particularly in regions like Iberia in which cross-religious contact was much more common, parsing the axes of people's spiritual and sexual orientations is slightly more complicated. Particularly clear evidences survives regarding people's sexual preferences — or at least sexual behavior — in the context of prostitution. Christian, female prostitutes often vehemently rejected non-Christians that they recognized by their emasculatingly circumcised penis, demonstrating a strong homospirituality to their sexual preferences.<sup>182</sup> This behavior, so likely enforced and reinforced by laws and mores that made women's bodies sites of ethnic boundary, fits the Christian, homospiritual ideal much better than did the behavior of Christian men with non-Christian prostitutes.

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<sup>181</sup> Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet," 19.

<sup>182</sup> David Nirenberg, "Religious and Sexual Boundaries in the Medieval Crown of Aragon," in *Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, ed. Mark D. Mayerson and Edward D. English (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 141–160 (147–48).

Quite unlike the personal and social censures against Christian women having sex with Muslim men, it was not uncommon, and was even sometimes encouraged, the prostitution of Muslim women to Christian men.<sup>183</sup> In practice, then, spiritually heterosexual behavior was not uncommon, particularly where there was more opportunity for it. Such sexual relations, however, occurred outside of marriage and were thus always, already unnatural, unclean acts. While such hetero-sexual behavior was tolerated in some regions between prostitutes and their clients, it was never truly virtuous, spiritually clean behavior. The compulsory sexual orientation of Christian tradition was a spiritually homospiritual one that enforced attraction to someone of the same faith, and sexual intercourse with them only within marriage. Bevis, in closely adhering to these strictures, embodies the imperative to inflect his sexual orientation with a homospiritual desire.

In this sense, to mirror the monolith of contemporary terminology, his actions evidence a “homo-sexual” orientation. Since maintaining the cleanness of his own spiritual household requires the exclusion of uncleanness, Bevis rejects the sexual relationship with Josian that would bring his senses, the gateways to his soul, in contact with her spiritually impure, Muslim soul. As an ideal Christian, Bevis’s foremost concern is with the salvation of his soul, which must be kept clean in order to receive the divine grace necessary for salvation. Josian represents a sinful contaminant that would endanger that salvation, giving Bevis an opposed — a hetero — spiritual relationality to her. As a prescriptive literary construct, Bevis gives no hint of a heterospiritual desire for the

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<sup>183</sup> Karras, *Sexuality*, 107.

Saracen woman. Because of his concern for his soul, his overall desire for proximate interactions is one of spiritual *homos*. As is evident in his visceral response to Josian's sexual advances, this affinity for spiritual likeness governs even Bevis's sexual desire — or apparent absence thereof. Where this concern for homospirituality so dominates his sexuality, his sexual orientation itself is expressed along a line between spiritual sameness and difference. Bevis is, in a word, homo-sexual.

The scene that follows serves to illustrate even more acutely Bevis's same-soul sexuality and its grounding in his concern with Josian's spiritual un/cleanness. Cunningly deducing the motivation of Bevis's rejection (and perhaps realizing that she came on a bit strong), Josian seeks Bevis out at the inn to apologize and make herself more desirable to Bevis's Christian, homospiritual sensibilities. In contrast to the lack of influence that spirituality had on Josian's initial sexuality, the exchange that follows demonstrates the direct relationship between Bevis's homospirituality and his sexual orientation: "Forgive me, that I have blasphemed, / And I will right now as a punishment / Forsake all my false gods / And for your love take Christendom!" / "In that case," said the knight, / "I give my consent to you, my sweet creature!" / And he kissed her at that covenant.<sup>184</sup> Apparently sorry that she disrespected his wishes to remain oriented only to a sameness of clean soul, Josian apologizes and proclaims that she will immediately disavow her pagan gods, and become a Christian. The thrust of Bevis's reaction is telling: he immediately exclaims

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<sup>184</sup> "Forghem me, that ichave misede, / And ich wile right now to mede / Min false godes al forsake / And Cristendom for thee love take!" / "In that maner," queth the knight, / "I graunte thee, me swete wight!" / And kiste hire at that cordement." Herzman et al., "Bevis," 1193–99.

that he wishes to marry her, addresses her as his “sweet creature” and kisses the maiden whom he had previously so adamantly rejected.

One could argue that perhaps Bevis merely concealed erotic attraction for Josian until which time that she offered to convert to his religion rather than the other way around. Like Barnard, what is portrayed in a sense matters far more than any imagined interiority to Bevis’s character. Even so, I believe that it would be more accurate to describe Bevis as *repressing* an attraction for Josian’s body, rather than concealing one. While a latent desire for her female body may be precisely what motivates Bevis to feel such heightened peril at Josian’s sexual advances, his sexuality is nevertheless constructed according to a compulsory, homospiritually erotic ideal.

Up until the very moment when Josian indicates that she will no longer threaten his spiritual cleanness, Bevis expresses nothing but complete revulsion at the idea of either a marriage or a sexual relationship with Josian. In contrast, as soon as she professes that she will convert, thus falling within the bounds of his homospiritual sexuality, Bevis provides her physical affection as a symbol of their entry into marriage — the only socially acceptable arrangement of the day in which they could have the sexual relationship they now mutually desire. Like Barnard, Bevis may indeed possess a hetero-orientation toward Josian’s sexed body, but any such aspect of this sexuality is ultimately overridden by his spiritually guided desire for sameness.<sup>185</sup> His behavior models the

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<sup>185</sup> Likewise, the homospiritual aspect of Bevis’s sexuality surely overrode other inflections, such as his likely orientation toward the wealth tied to Josian, or her reproductive potential, her age, etc.

homospiritual erotic orientation that, while doubtfully pervasively inherent across the medieval Christian community, was nevertheless idealized as natural.

Conversely, Bevis's kiss could be read as merely ritualistic, whereby his change in behavior does not necessarily signal an erotic orientation toward Josian's professed interest in spiritual cleanness. But even such a "social gesture" as a kiss was often considered laden with sexual potential.<sup>186</sup> Moreover, the poem's narrator seems to categorize the kiss as erotically laden. When two Saracen knights of a rival suitor accuse Bevis of having "deflowered" Josian, the narrator asserts his innocence of this sexual act by claiming that "he did nothing, except kiss her once."<sup>187</sup> That the narrator portrays the kiss as an exception to Bevis's innocence of sexual activity with Josian — even specifying that it happened only once — seems to lock the kiss firmly as a sexual act, if a minor one.

Regardless, Josian's first attempt to convince him to couple was fraught with overt, carnal desire that distanced her from spiritual cleanness and was met with rejection. Her second entreaty, in contrast to the aggressive desire associated with Saracen women, was characterized by, in medieval parlance, meekness and a pledge to wash herself clean of sin by becoming a Christian. Whereas the former stirred only

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<sup>186</sup> "The rejection of sexual temptation was particularly important for women, who were even more susceptible to sexual corruption than were men, according to Gratian, and who could be led astray not only by overt sexual advances, but even by social gestures such as talking, kissing, and embracing," James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 246. See also Yannick Carré, *Le Baiser Sur la Bouche au Moyen Age: Rites symboles, mentalités, à travers les textes et les images XIe–XVe siècles* (Paris: Le Léopard d'Or, 1992), though caution should be taken in overapplying remarks on continental beliefs to insular contexts.

<sup>187</sup> "He dede nothing, noute ones hire kiste," Herzman et al., "Bevis," 1213.



repugnance and flight in Bevis, the latter excited a kiss and pledge of marriage — and the associated sexual consummation.

Bevis holds off, though, from a complete sexual coupling, and remains fairly strict in his spiritually inflected erotic desire. Though he has kissed his Christian-to-be betrothed, their marriage and its consummation does not come until much later in the poem. Before then, as if to emphasize the homo-spirituality of Bevis and Josian's relationship even before her conversion, the narrative repeatedly demonstrates Josian's new-found cleanness. After the two set off together, Josian gives piously to the poor, practicing good, Christian almsgiving even before her baptism.<sup>188</sup> Later on in the wilderness, when lions attack, the beasts avoid harming Josian because they sense her virginity, a sign of her spiritual cleanliness.<sup>189</sup> Eventually, Josian is baptized, the two are wed, and they consummate their marriage, begetting two children whose exploits finish out the romance.

The postponing of a further sexual relationship until after Josian has been washed clean of sin through her baptism is the practiced proof of their now-mutual homospiritual desire. Bevis withholds desire for more intimate sexual contact until his betrothed's soul is washed completely clean via baptism, and Josian expresses no sexual desire for Bevis until her spiritually unclean difference from Bevis has been cleansed. *Bevis of Hampton* thus provides a fairly manifest illustration of the relationship between the medieval

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<sup>188</sup> Herzman et al., "Bevis," 2076.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 2390.

Christian ideal of homospirituality and sexual orientation. While Bevis seems to note the femininity of Josian's body and is quite hetero-sex oriented in his physically erotic attraction toward her, he also utterly rejects Josian so long as she is a spiritually unclean pagan — and then sharply turns to erotic expression in direct response to her declaration of conversion. His behavior expresses an acute awareness of the un/clean binary of Christian spirituality, a homospirituality. Moreover, the manner in which his concern for the cleanness of his soul dominates his orientation effects an outright sexual desire rooted deeply in his spiritual orientation.

As paramount as Christianity was within the dominant medieval *mentalité*, little, including sexuality, escaped its influence. Consciousness of an ultimate binary of virtuous and sinful, clean and unclean permeated nearly every aspect of how medieval Christians apprehended their lives. Sexual object-choice was no exception. If medieval thinkers ever did conceive of hetero-desire for individuals of the opposite sex as something distinct from sex and gender, it seems they would have articulated it essentially as part of a homospirituality.<sup>190</sup> Coupling between one man and one woman was considered in accordance with the natural order of the world as planned by God, thus a spiritually clean pursuit. Seeking a sexual partner of the opposite sex, then, was to seek a partner who likewise, homospiritually, desired to follow God's natural order.

Since sexual desire was amalgamated with sex and gender in medieval thought, however, any understanding of erotic orientation, as we call it today, would not have been

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<sup>190</sup> Much as some contemporary Christians do when presenting homophobic arguments.

dominated by orientations toward the primary and secondary sex characteristics of bodies. While manifold aspects surely influenced attraction, *Bevis and the Barnard* illustrate on the literary landscape what Jacques could only reflect on through a mirror, darkly: a virtuous sense of erotics oriented by a sameness of spiritual cleanness. This truly medieval conception of attraction and orientation was as guided by the medieval concern for the spiritual cleanness of the soul as were other medieval epistemologies. Where a desire for homospiritual relationships drove medieval Christian interactions in general, so too did it inflect medieval desire, at least among a segment of the faithful. As the literary exempla *Bevis of Hampton* and *Erl of Tolous* illustrate, the literate laity of the central Midlands, at the very least those consumers of Ashmole 61 and Cambridge Ff. 2.38, were exposed to representations of homospiritual desire. For the trade masters, this affirmed the ways of knowing and feeling that they considered part and parcel to their social dominance and spiritual stability. For others, though, like the underemployed apprentices and journeymen — to say nothing of abject women — these presented erotics of same-soul sexuality were a controlling force upon the erotic impulses in their day-to-day lives. The lines themselves recording homospiritual texts on the manuscript page straightened the knowing and feeling, and thus being, of those who followed them with their eyes, ears, lips.

## CHAPTER 5

### BEFORE GENDER, AFTER SEX<sup>191</sup>

Jacques's homilies and hagiography in Middle English translation, and neighboring compiled romances, prescribed a univocal, straight, narrative along which to pursue homospiritual living for those in and around Leicester and Beauvale who were exposed to them. A few hundred years and more than an hundred miles north, however, at Rievaulx Abbey, the writings of Aelred began offering by the 1160s a more open, dialogic option, with multiple present perspectives efficacious for the spiritual strivings of its readers. On the one hand, the ideology presented by Aelred, in his *De spiritali amicitia*, differs in topic markedly from texts like *Tolous* and *Bevis*. in that Aelred ostensibly discusses chaste, monastic relationships between men, and not relationships of reproductive, genital contact between lay men and women. On the other hand, Aelred speaks often in terms that may be inclusive of many types of relationships, and constructs desire and interpersonal orientation in terms inclusive of lay, marital relationships — as well as more ambiguously erotic relationships. This is particularly the case with regard to his articulations of gender — or lack thereof.

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<sup>191</sup> A portion of this chapter began as my contribution to a conference paper coauthored with Robert S. Sturges, to whom I am deeply indebted specifically for his collaboration on that paper, and generally for his direction of this study. Robert S. Sturges and Ben Ambler, "Aelred of Rievaulx's Queer Time and Space," with Robert S. Sturges, *Beyond 'Lesbians and Gays in the Church': New Approaches to the Histories of Christianity and Same-Sex Desire* (Birkbeck, University of London: 2015).

Common beliefs on gender understood binary categories of male and female as bodily distinct, while medical and legal experts found these categories mutably dependent on a balance of humors, and socially enforced for the sake of compliance with Creation. And so while common perception certainly held that there were two gendered categories of man and woman (the former likewise masculine and naturally oriented toward women, and the latter likewise feminine and naturally oriented toward men), at the same time it was not exactly fringe for medieval Christians to have an “ontological awareness that these [gender categories] were social conventions.”<sup>192</sup>

Aelred, in his understanding of marriage as a friendship in its essence, demonstrates a vein of this understanding of gender as a social construct, and moreover deconstructs it. In his exegesis of Genesis in *De spiritali amicitia*, he disregards the distinctions among gender and instead highlights the importance of spiritual sameness as a foundation for friendship, a practice of friendship, and a culmination of friendship in god. Where the romances discussed in the previous chapter, and those in the following, present implicit models of homospiritual bases of desire, Aelred articulates a fairly explicit model whereby desire for another human should begin from a shared orientation toward Christ, proceed with a sameness of direction toward further cleanness for Christ, and culminate with a sameness of perfect unity with Christ. For Aelred this is certainly, ideally, a chaste process, but he not only acknowledges that this spiritual orientation can

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<sup>192</sup> Miri Rubin, “The Body, Whole and Vulnerable, in Fifteenth-Century England,” in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 19–28 (26).

manifest carnally, but makes allowances for its expression within friendship — so long as it is left behind as an imperfect dalliance on the way toward perfection in Christ. Moreover, whereas the portrayals of homospiritual desire in popular media are distinctly male-female, Aelred's are at times genderless, at others same-sexed — even in cases where he implies an allowance for physical, though not necessarily sexual, desire.

Aelred's emphasis on not merely a unity of male and female but a lack of distinction in the first place, I believe, importantly subtends his explicit prescriptions that desire be based on a sameness of spiritual orientation toward God. Aelred's suggestion to leave behind genital difference and reproductive imperative in locating desire prefigures contemporary queer theorists such as Lee Edelman, J. Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. Recently, their theoretical work has been productively applied to our understandings of the Middle Ages by those such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Robert S. Sturges as a form of “queer historicism.”<sup>193</sup> Reconsidering our very premises of time, queer historicism understands history and the Middle Ages through “models [of time] that are queer because they resist linear, developmental historical patterns based on human growth, reproduction, evolution, causation, and so on, in favor of disjunctive models based on unexpected but potentially fruitful juxtapositions, sympathies, and responses, models that resist the linear and the genetic.”<sup>194</sup> Highlighting the misleading nature of

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<sup>193</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>194</sup> Robert S. Sturges, *Theaters of Authority: the Circulation of Power in Medieval Biblical Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 6.

mainstream conceptions of time as progressive from one instance to another to another, Edelman, Halberstam, and Muñoz elaborate on a queer temporality that evokes Aelred's own understanding of ordering time and space around a *jouissance* originating outside of it.<sup>195</sup>

As Edelman has suggested, erotic queerness exposes linear, reproductive time as a fantasy that “figures the availability of an unthinkable *jouissance* that would put an end to fantasy—and, with it, to futurity—by reducing the assurance of meaning in fantasy's promise of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive.”<sup>196</sup> Noting the fantastic nature of the many typical understandings of the passage of time based in goals of human reproduction, Edelman suggests that acknowledging a pleasure outside of this fantasy highlights the reproductive fantasy's own repetitive, restricted nature. There is instead, he suggests, a pleasure around which to orient oneself outside of this time. Halberstam suggests further that a “queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding....”<sup>197</sup> Orienting our experience of and passage through time around reproduction, they argue, not only limits conceptions of desire, but locks us

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 6 ff.

<sup>196</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 39.

<sup>197</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 152.

in an endless cycle of the reproductive drive — trapped in the fantasy that is time, and straightened away from a kind of pleasure outside of it.

An alternative, affective temporality, according to Muñoz, among others, offers instead a way of knowing with queer parallels to Aelred's own. They suggest that “the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds.”<sup>198</sup> In Aelred's case, he suggests that our presentness in the world must be seen not in relation to male and female genders, desire for bodies, or reproduction between them, but rather — as Muñoz articulates — in relation to something outside of our present time: for Aelred that perfect, affective place, outside of time, that is union with Christ.

And while Aelred prescribes for everyone this spiritual orientation toward something outside of space and time, the enclosed monastic space in which he lived and wrote allowed him a sort of prelapsarian laboratory, where distractions of lay, reproductive imperatives were distant, and thus the pull of reproductively “natural” temporality was less influential and more subject to contemplation, variation, and experimentation. Away from the lay world where good Christian living was tied to reproduction and accompanying notions of genital, bodily difference, the straightness of time imposed by reproductive life breaks down, and Aelred refigures the traditional binary of the sexes into a sameness that engenders utopian friendship. Thus he eliminates

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<sup>198</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 27.



the foundations of male *superordination* and female *subordination* that subtend reproductive temporality, and in so doing creates a sort of temporal vacuum. This void, his dialogue suggests, may be filled by a pleasure-driven mode of being—a pleasure of mutual, and parallel, spiritual desire for Christ.

### *Assigned Spiritual at Birth*

In his dialogue *On Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred performs a Halberstam-esque refiguration of the “natural” definition of the human through his exegesis of Genesis. Many of his closely contemporaneous exegetes, such as Abelard, Yvo of Chartres, or Ernardus of Bonneval, reinforce the superordination of men over women through their preference for the second creation of humans in genesis (here Adam, having already been created, has a rib taken from his side from which Eve is made) and their interpretation thereof that woman is subordinate to man, having been created from the former.<sup>199</sup> Others, such as Hildegard von Bingen, allowed for some deemphasis of gender in their own exegeses.<sup>200</sup>

Aelred, however, rather even than favoring the first version of humans’ creation in which all are made at once, parses the second creation as explicitly justifying Eve as an equal to Adam, and moreover grammatically dissolves the gendered distinction between

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<sup>199</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Clare A. Lees, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–29 (29n104). See also Jacqueline Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34–51 (40).

<sup>200</sup> Murray, “One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?” 50.

them. Where interpretations such as Hildegard's construct the two as a sort of pair who are together, rather than super or subordinate, Aelred suggests that the two are, beyond being separate but equal in gender, indistinct from one another in their essence. As he puts it, "How beautiful it is that from the side of the first human the second was taken, so that nature might teach that everyone is equal, collateral as it were: that there is in human affairs neither superior nor inferior, which is a characteristic of friendship."<sup>201</sup> Whether Aelred himself is primarily or exclusively inclined erotically toward men or not, for humans in general he establishes an equality among the genders that muddles them together, dissolves boundaries between the two, including that between superordinate and subordinate. In his exegesis of creation, he is at once explicit and implicit on this matter.

Explicitly, he is quite clear even on the face of his words. He stresses Eve and Adam's equality, and deemphasizes their differences, choosing to say not that man and woman are equal, but that *everyone* is equal (*omnes aequales*). In further describing these equals as collateral (*collaterales*), Aelred at once evokes Eve's origin in the story, *conlateralus*, from the side, and emphasizes their shared direction, their shared orientation. One taken from the side of the other, they proceed henceforth not directed toward each other and their bodies, but collaterally, in the same direction, as equals. Even here, further, Aelred embeds the core of his thesis, that proceeding together oriented in the same way — toward God — is the core of his definition of true friendship. Echoing Paul

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<sup>201</sup> "Pulchre autem de latere primi hominis secundus assumitur, ut natura doceret omnes aequales, quasi collatérales; nec esset in rebus humanis superior uel inferior, quod est amicitiae proprium." Aelredi Rievallensis, "de Spirituali Amicitia," in CCCM I, ed. A. Hoste and C. H. Talbot (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), c. 1.57 (298–99).

in Corinthians, he reminds that among humans there is neither inferior nor superior — and that this equality — this sameness — is the core of defining friendship. And as Aelred goes on to discuss at length, true friendship is one in which its parties proceed in parallel, together, toward God.

Implicitly, the very syntax and diction with which Aelred builds his exegesis embodies his argument of sameness and parallelism. As Aelred assembles the prelapsarian time in the space of his dialogue, it is not woman that is created from the side of man, but a “second human,” *hominis secundus*, that is made from the side of the “first human,” *primi hominis*. Attention to Aelred’s original words here is illuminating. In a construction not uncommon to Latin, Aelred employs one referent for two adjectives, describing the two original humans together as “*primi hominis secundus*.” On the one hand, in the preceding sentence Aelred does follow traditional interpretations of God having “generated woman from the substance of man.” And Aelred’s choice of *homo* instead of *vir* is unsurprising, since the Latin Vulgate uses *homo* throughout Genesis to refer to Adam. But while he pays lip service to tradition, and *homo* most commonly refers to a man, specifically, it is also semiotically open, signifying simply a human or person, as well. In this way, Aelred syntactically reinforces his point that the two are collateral and equal — moreover, that they are the same. In the structure of the clause, there is no difference in gender between this first and second human. In fact, there is no distinction at all — where both *primi* and *secundus* modify *hominis*, these two humans, in the sentence, more even than sameness, possess unity.

And, lest we forget, Aelred's choice of Latin construction also allows his meaning to come back into itself — one man comes from the other. This significance of the words on the page bears particular consideration relative to the space-time of the monastery. The text was itself produced and consumed away from the lay life of men and women differentiated by gender, whose orientation toward one another was, ideally, based in a religious, reproductive imperative rather than, say, one of pleasure. Instead, in the same-sex environment of Rievaulx, Aelred's particular syntax allows the text to call the reader back to the word's more common meaning: "de latere primi hominis secundus" — The second *man* from the side of the first man.

And so Aelred's linguistically gender-fluid Eve at once demonstrates equality and deemphasizes bodily difference. They are two *homines*. In Aelred's words, they are friends that share a single linguistic body — not unlike Paul's suggestion in Galatians that all true believers share one singular and undifferentiated body. Even before articulating his advice to find pleasure not in worldly relationships but in God, or detailing his thesis of human friendship — including marriage — as a vehicle to carry one's soul toward God, Aelred elides typical difference of gender together, highlights their sameness, encodes their unity. Without gendered difference, then, there is no focus on genital difference, or the reproduction for which this difference allegedly exists. Without worldly results, pleasure remains a driving force between bodies. For Aelred, this was the particular pleasure of divine love.

As a text consumed by audiences, then, Aelred's writing does not provide the same sorts of lines of orientation along which audiences might straighten themselves. He removes the coordinates of gendered difference, leaving him and readers of his dialogue open to alternate orientations. Aelred's text, particularly as a dialogue, offers the opportunity to plot other courses that deviate, though do not necessarily oppose, traditional medieval understandings of gender and desire. As Sturges articulates, dialogue "is precisely that which does not appropriate or identify itself with the other, but only approximates or allows the speaker to stand beside the other in that relationship of similarity without identity, difference without opposition, that I call deviance."<sup>202</sup> In a phenomenological sense, differing strains of thought in a dialogue may travel together, and whether parallel or diverging, they merely deviate *from one another*, rather than originating utterly independently, and colliding in opposition. In this way, texts constructed as true dialogue provide not one but multiple horizons of expectation with which audiences may identify. Standing on whatever horizon in the text to which their lived experiences conform, one may then experience other positions in the text, as Sturges notes, "beside the other" rather than opposite the other. Without the univocality of, say, the romance poetry in Ashmole 61, Cambridge 2.38, or the below-discussed Thornton Manuscript, a dialogue such as Aelred's allows its audiences to see themselves beside its model, without necessitating that they identify with it.

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<sup>202</sup> Robert S. Sturges, *Dialogue and Deviance: Male-Male Desire in the Dialogue Genre (Plato to Aelred, Plato to Sade, Plato to the Postmodern)* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 10.

As a text, rather than drawing a straightness in which its audience ought to operate, its back and forth of voices both models and permits deviation from traditional ways of knowing and feeling. The back and forth between the character of Aelred in the dialogue, and his interlocutors, offers “a pure deviance without any sign of a straight and narrow philosophical path that might give these deviations a center or even an attainable goal.”<sup>203</sup> And while Aelred certainly constructs himself in the dialogue within a position of wisdom, he does not treat his interlocutors nearly so much as “straw men” as do so many other authorities in the dialogue genre. Those with whom he speaks are characterized with their own contributions to the conversation which aid substantively in illuminating same-soul friendship.<sup>204</sup> Aelred thus on the one hand offers an understanding of gender here that flows separately from what is traditional and, on the other hand, presents it generically as lines that deviate *from one another* — not one deviating from the other. It is a heterogeneity of epistemology operating within a homogeneity of tradition. In a phenomenological sense, they “deviate from one another, not from a central doctrine,” moving separately but not oppositionally.<sup>205</sup> Aelred’s queering of gender in Genesis, then, is queer in both form and substance.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 14.

*Time by Sex Equals Babies; Pleasure by Friendship Equals Grace*

The elision, or erasure, of gendered difference that Aelred establishes in *Genesis* importantly subtends his overall argument in two interdependent ways. First, it removes the bases upon which straight time, directed toward reproductive potentialities, depends and instead opens temporality for divine, extratemporal direction. Second, it disorients pleasure from reproductive, genital contact between differing genders. This disassociates pleasure from reproduction, generally, but more specifically a worldly act with temporal effects — reproduction — as the motivation for pleasure.

As Aelred removes the notion that Adam's new friend is subordinate, and dissolves their bodily difference, he leaves behind the kind of straight time experienced by laypeople engaged in reproduction, and drawn along lines such as those in Ashmole 61, or Cambridge 2.38. Both the space of the chaste, same-sexed monastery, and that of the dialogue, follow a timeline apart from the straight time in which desire is oriented between genitally different bodies whose contact is required for reproduction. There is, then, distance from — though for all the dominance of reproductive culture not true independence from — a pleasure based in a superordinate man's reproduction of his form via the matter of the subordinate woman.

For the written space of his dialogue generally, and the above passage particularly, Aelred's exegesis of *Creation* constructs a queerly egalitarian temporality, especially when he reimagines the all-male space of the monastery as itself reproducing the prelapsarian Eden. We may accurately describe, through the contemporary lens of queer

theory, the monastic space as a temporality that deviated from the lay world's experience of time and space. But medieval monastics in general understood this in their own terms, too, with the same kind of egalitarian aspirations that queer theory imagines in utopian futurities. "This ideal of equality probably never existed even in the early Christian communities. It would only have been possible for a very small community which lived in eschatological expectation, without making any provisions for a long future on earth. However the idea of equality became one of the most important features of community life — the foundation, as it were, on which monastic life had to be built."<sup>206</sup>

Aelred himself expands on this general monastic understanding of their cloistered space's striving for an eschatological ideal outside of space and time. In particular, he connects its deviant time, and undifferentiated gender, to a pleasure that relies not on interaction between different bodies, or the reproduction associated therewith, but instead on a spiritual striving among humans and toward god. He recounts in the third book of the dialogue, "...as I was walking around the monastery, with the brothers sitting in a most loving circle, I marveled at the leaves, blossoms, and fruits of each single tree as if I were in the fragrant bowers of paradise. Finding not one soul whom I did not love and, I was sure, not one soul by whom I was not loved, I was filled with a joy that surpassed all

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<sup>206</sup> Jens Ruffer, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Institutional Limits of Monastic Friendship" in *Perspectives for an Architecture of Solitude: Essays on Cistercians, Art, and Architecture in Honour of Peter Fergusson*, ed. Terry N. Kinder (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 55–62 (57–58).



the delights of the world.”<sup>207</sup> He removes the presupposition that desire need be complimentary, superordinate and subordinate — consequently, he removes the assumption that pleasure need be reproductive, copulative, or even involve genital contact. Moreover, as Aelred articulates it, the love among friends, in an edenic spacetime, explicitly surpasses worldly pleasure — including sexual pleasure. Rather, “a joy that surpassed all the delights of the world” filled him — a divine joy.

This atemporal temporality, so to speak, thus frees the soul from both reproduction and gender, worldly things, and allows time and one’s life to be guided by another pleasure, that divine one ultimately located outside of space and time. Throughout his dialogue, Aelred instead asserts an erotics inspired by divine love, expressed in non-genital, spiritually-based desire, and resulting in spiritual love or friendship. In this way, the experience of time enabled by the monastic space, and as extension the dialogic space on the page, allows for atemporal potentiality — in the technical *and* religious senses of the word. Hypothetically, uncoupled from a reproductively driven experience of time, the monastic space allows heavenly goals to be more completely centered and, consequently, human relationships to be more completely centered on the divine. The potentiality of salvation that would, from grace, follow, is atemporal in its extraworldliness, and atemporal in its existence outside of the passage of time. But whether within a monastery or without, Aelred considered this kind of divinely-

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<sup>207</sup> “... cum claustra monasterii circuirem, consedente fratrum amantissima corona, et quasi inter paradisiacas amoenitates singularum arborum folia, flores fructusque mirarer; nullum inueniens in illa multitudine quem nondiligerem, et a quo me diligi non confiderem, tanto gaudio perfusus sum ut omnes mundi huius delicias superaret.” Aelredi Rievallensis, “de Spirituali Amicitia,” 3.82 (334).

oriented interpersonal relationship the definition of true friendship. As this section will discuss, Aelred identifies a sameness of spiritual state — and of spiritual goal — as the basis of attraction between two friends.

Aelred's exegesis of the first two humans' creation, though, foregrounds this definition of friendship. In the queer temporality of the dialogue, Aelred asserts that the relationship between the first two humans, traditionally thought of as the first marriage, is itself definitional of the kind of friendship to which all should aspire. This move toward the interpersonal aspect of this first marriage — and thus marriage generally — and away from the sexual and reproductive potentialities of it, in conjunction with his ungendered interpretation of the first marriage, suggests that same-sexed friendship could be just as potent as opposite-sexed marriage, and just as sacred.

Aelred's equation of marriage as friendship, however, diverges from the popular lay understanding of marriage and from many of his contemporaries, who “focus their attention on sexual consummation and procreation as the distinctive character of marriage, [whereas] Aelred considers the interpersonal and social nature of marriage to be better understood under the category of friendship.”<sup>208</sup> Of course, if opposite-sexed marriage is to be understood as friendship, and by association same-sexed friendship as equally significant to marriage, sexual intercourse cannot be definitional. In this Aelred

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<sup>208</sup> Marie Anne Mayeski, “‘Like a Boat is Marriage’: Aelred on Marriage as a Christian Way of Life” 107. See also Sturges, *Dialogue and Deviance*, 69.

follows more closely than his peers Augustine, who “was the first to develop a full and coherent theory of marriage that was not dependent on the conjugal debt.”<sup>209</sup>

Augustine, in his *De bono coniugali*, describes the relationship between Adam and Eve as the “first marriage,” a union in which “indeed, in both sexes there was, even without such sexual intercourse, a certain friendly and genuine mutual love of the one guiding and the other yielding.”<sup>210</sup> In another of his treatises, *De consensu evangelistarum*, Augustine more clearly outlines that even when the relationship between a man and a woman has not been consummated, “it is able to be maintained and called marriage not by the sexual mingling of the body, but through the preserving affection of the mind.”<sup>211</sup> Although Augustine makes this point in reference to Mary and Joseph, he explicitly explains that the marriage of Christ’s parents serves as an example “to those who are faithful with respect to marriage [*fidelibus coniugatis*]” that the couple’s relationship may be considered a marriage, despite a lack of carnal relations, so long as theirs is a consensual arrangement founded upon mutual feelings of love.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 43.

<sup>210</sup> “*primi coniugii*,” and “*poterat enim esse in utroque sexu etiam sine tali commixtione alterius regentis, alterius obsequentis amicalis quaedam et germana coniunctio*,” St. Augustine of Hippo, “*De Bono Coniugali*,” *Sancti Avreli Avgvstini*, ed. Joseph Zycha (Prague: F. Tempsky, 1900), 189, 188. Cf. St. Augustine of Hippo, “The Good of Marriage,” *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, trans. Chares T. Wilcox et al., ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 11, 9.

<sup>211</sup> “*posse permanere uocarique coniugium non permixto corporis sexu, sed custodito mentis affectu*,” Francisus Weihrich, ed., *Sancti Avreli Avgvstini, De Consensu Evangelistarum* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1963 [originally 1904]), 82. Cf. Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: the Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>212</sup> Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind*, *Ibid.*

By specifically naming couples *fideles coniugatis* both as recipients and practitioners of this model of marriage, Augustine emphasizes the necessity of commitment between spouses for a successful and valid nuptial union. In founding their definition of wedlock on the writings of Augustine, twelfth-century canonists outlined a model of holy “sacramental” marriage in which *only* consensual love, an *affectus mentis*, was necessary for a licit union.

Despite this, attitudes about marriage that prevailed in many municipalities and popular practice still held fast to sexual consummation and reproduction as definitional of marriage. These notions did run “along Augustinian contours” that included the saint’s “three goods” of marriage (reproduction, the promotion of mutual fidelity between partners, and the bond of love).<sup>213</sup> One of Aelred’s contemporaries, Gratian, is representative of these views. He considered mutual consent a critical component of marriage, but also “felt that Christians ought to marry... namely in order to reproduce.”<sup>214</sup> This defined a popular trend for centuries to come, but it did not define the aforementioned canon law, from which “lawyers and theologians had insisted for centuries that marriage was... properly contracted by present consent [alone].”<sup>215</sup> Thus Aelred’s classification of marriage as a subtype of friendship did not necessarily

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 135. See also James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 89. And Augustine, “The Good of Marriage,” esp. chap. 3.

<sup>214</sup> Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 240.

<sup>215</sup> Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 502.

contradict Augustinian or contemporaneous definitions of marriage, but it did run counter to strong, popular views, readily enforced by local church and community leaders.

Not merely an intellectual framework allowing prelapsarian analogy within the monastery, Aelred's consideration of marriage as friendship shaped his interactions with the broader Christian world. The childless marriage of Edward the Confessor and Edith Godwin, while blamed for the Norman Conquest, was championed by Aelred. As the cult of Edward struggled over the years to get Edward officially canonized, Aelred rewrote an earlier version of the king's *vita*, greatly expanding its focus on the would-be saint's chastity, and devotion to the virgin Mary.<sup>216</sup> Aelred's detailing of Edward's and Edith's marriage as a chaste friendship defined not by its consummation or reproduction, but by its devotion to god and pursuit of salvation, was convincing enough that Edward was finally canonized in 1163.

Aelred, one might imagine, believed that Edward's praxis of chaste marriage could validate, at the highest level of lay life, his own teachings on purity-based friendship as an expression of loving God. Edward's choice to be chaste and childless in his marital friendship certainly aligns with a belief that when one's mode of living is freed from the reproductive, whether this freed mind is prelapsarian or postlapsarian, one is available to pursue "that level of friendship that consists in the love and knowledge of

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<sup>216</sup> Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage*, 123. See also Aelred of Rievaulx, *Vita S. Edwardi regis*, PL 195 (747–48).

God.”<sup>217</sup> The significance of the first and second humans’ relationship as foundational to Aelred’s articulation of a homospiritual orientation coheres between the longstanding medieval interpretation of Adam & Eve as the first marriage, and Aelred’s own defense of the marriage act as a form of friendship. And so in understanding marriage as a form of friendship, and the first two humans as agender, ambiguous — or even masculine — in gender, Aelred in a sense merely runs in a longstanding, interpretation that something spiritual — not bodily — is the basis of how two humans ought to orient their affection.

*I Prefer Your Love to Jesus?*

Aelred’s sort of gender universalism in his exegesis of Genesis, and his tandem equation of marriage to friendship, offers a medieval articulation of desire that is at the least ungendered, and at the most specifically permissive of a male-male desire oriented not by bodily sameness but by a homos of spiritual striving — toward cleanness in each other and, in parallel, toward Christ. Thus liberated from gender, and empowered by equation to marriage, Aelred sets out to define in his own terms a type of relationship between two humans that is on the one hand oriented toward spiritually clean sameness in one another and on the other hand oriented, in parallel, toward Christ, and salvation outside of space and time. Despite these extracorporeal bases, however, this friendship need not be strictly without its worldly expression. In this way, while Aelred never strictly condones *sexual*

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<sup>217</sup> “quidam gradus est amicitia uicinus perfectioni, que in Dei dilectione et cognitione consistit.” Aelredi Rievallensis, “de Spiritali Amicitia,” c. 2.14 (305).

expression or conduct between two friends, regardless of gender, he does make allowances in this kind of homospiritual relationship for something that I argue can certainly be regarded as generally erotic.

While Aelred uses his relationship with another monk as exemplum of the kind of spiritual friendship he advocates, he also defines what I call homospirituality in fairly explicit terms. as he says, “Naturally, a true friend admires in a friend nothing that is outside of his soul, embracing virtue in its own seat, all that is remaining having been left outside him, neither caring greatly if it is present nor missing it if absent.”<sup>218</sup> In a sense, what I term “homospirituality” is so ideological for Aelred — and more broadly, I think we should consider — that he does not even invoke another term for it except, simply, “friendship.” At its core, for him, are the two components I identify as pervasive and definitional of homospirituality: first, orientation of oneself toward the *soul* of others — and “nothing but.” Second, in that spiritual orientation, consideration of *virtue*: that is, the absence of sin, cleanness. Everything else besides the clean soul is “irrelevant.” For Aelred, this is not anti-corporeal; importantly he does not recommend the eschewing of the body in desire, but instead highlights its accident. Bodies are present in friendship, and the orientation between friends, but they are not to dictate that orientation.

That this orientation for the clean soul of another in friendship is, then, a *same-soul* orientation is inherent in the Christian imperative to routinely wash clean one’s soul,

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<sup>218</sup> “Fidelis quippe amicus nihil in amico quod extra animum eius sit, inteuetur; uirtutem in propria sua sede complectens, caetera omnia quasi extra eum posita, nec multum probans si adsint, nec si absint requires.” Ibid., c. 3.62.

and prevent as much as possible contamination in the first place. Seeking that sameness of clean soul, moreover, is part of this process of avoiding spiritual dirt. In Aelred's direction to seek, in friendship, nothing but virtue of the soul, he offers not just something in line with his contemporary across the sea, Jacques de Vitry, but a refinement. Aelred's statement evokes the homospiritual imperative Jacques delivers in his sermon, and seeks for himself, but with further focus, directing his audience not merely to seek a social environment of spiritually-clean sameness, but to seek direct relationships of this homospirituality. What evidence for this survives from Jacques only in the form of example, in his *vita* of Marie, Aelred explains to us in no uncertain terms. True friendship is oriented toward virtue in another's soul, which ideally bears sameness to one's own.

Aelred, though, is elsewhere even explicit on this final feature of homospirituality: that the cleanness of soul ought to also be a sameness of soul. He remarks later on in his dialogue that "where however equality of virtue is found, I do not greatly disapprove if for some time affection grafts onto its [virtue's] parts."<sup>219</sup> In case one previously missed the imperative for the cleanness of soul in his definition of friendship to likewise be a sameness of soul, implicit in the Christian imperative, Aelred spells out the substance of "equality of virtue" in friendship. And more than this, he begins to reveal the potential contours he sees in homospiritual friendship. Aelred, I argue, sees friendship as inherently erotic, in the general sense with which I use the word

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<sup>219</sup> Vbi tamen uirtutis inuenitur aequalitas, non multi improbo, si aliquantisper affectus suas inserit partes," Ibid. c. 3.116. Cf. Rüffer, 59.



in this study. Not necessarily ever sexual, though perhaps. Possibly romantic — but certainly spiritual. As he remarks, “I do not cut good to the quick, unlike some who want no one to be [considered] good except they who lack nothing in perfection.”<sup>220</sup> Like so many medieval Christian thinkers, Aelred highlights the imperfection in what they saw as postlapsarian human nature. And he even, after a fashion, embraces it as a potential step toward a cleaner sameness of soul.

Not unlike many of his contemporaries (Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, or Gilbert of Sempringham, for instance), Aelred believed that temptation, “part of the human condition, however painful, [was] a means of spiritual growth and therefore positive value.”<sup>221</sup> Brian Patrick McGuire notes, moreover, that Aelred approved of “appreciating physical beauty in other human beings.... so long as the pursuit did not lead to sin, for an attractive human being can also be virtuous and thus increase one’s own virtue.”<sup>222</sup> McGuire here highlights that physical orientation or desire can, indeed, be distinct from sexual desire, even as it may precede it. Just as Jacques’s action to touch Marie’s hand was basely physical before his body experienced primal stirrings that were sexual, desire itself can appreciate physical form without necessarily crossing into the sexual. But

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<sup>220</sup> “Ego bonum non ita ad uium resco, ut quidam qui neminem uolunt esse bonum, nisi eum cui ad perfectionem nihil desit.” Aelredi Rievallensis, “de Spiritali Amicitia,” c. 2.43.

<sup>221</sup> Henrietta Leyser, “Two Concepts of Temptation” in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 318–326 (319).

<sup>222</sup> Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: the Monastic Experience, 350–1250* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 303. Cf. Rüffer, 57.

McGuire takes this point too far, I think, in remarking that “the subjects of sexuality and of friendship [are] separate ones, however many points of contact there might be.”<sup>223</sup> Aelred himself allows for degrees of friendship, and while certainly he finds “carnal friendship” — not even necessarily sexual, to him, but certainly a sensual form of friendship in its appreciation of worldly pleasures — to be neither ideal, nor itself to culminate in salvation, he finds it to be in the same spectrum. Moreover, he seems to value the potentiality of the sexual in friendship, even as he expresses anxiety about its realization.

Indeed, as Aelred remarks elsewhere, in his *Liber de speculo caritatis*, physical, perhaps even sexual desire should be “neither rejected utterly nor allowed just as it gushes out.... when our attachment, however rational or even spiritual extends itself to someone of suspect age or sex, it is extremely advisable that it be held back within the bosom of the mind and not permitted to spill over into inane compliments or soft tenderness, unless perhaps, because of this the attachment may occasionally develop maturely and temperately until virtue loved and praised may be more fervently practiced.”<sup>224</sup> (Note, once again, virtue is to be the true object of love.) For Aelred, it seems, the *potentiality* of corporeal desire for another is a valuable tool in developing desire for spiritual cleanness in another, and the same state in oneself. Indeed, “*amicitia*

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<sup>223</sup> McGuire, *Friendship and Community*, xlix.

<sup>224</sup> Aelredi Rievallensis, “Liber de Speculo Caritatis,” in CCCM I, ed. A. Hoste and C. H. Talbot (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), cc. 27–28. Translation from Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. E. Conner (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Institute Publications, 1990).

*carnalis*... possesses an intrinsically ambiguous status insofar as it is crossed by the double polarization of *affectus carnalis*, condemnable when it leads to rendering man a slave to his carnal passions, and tolerable when it serves as the basis for ascension to virtue.”<sup>225</sup> Where it may be part and parcel to desiring spiritual cleanness, then, Aelred comes close, even, to approving of same-sexed desire — where “attachment... to someone of suspect... sex” should be “held back within the bosom of the mind” *unless* this desire can be the cause of “virtue loved” in another, and virtue “fervently practiced” in oneself.

Desire for a body sexed the same as one’s own, in other words, can be permissible so long as it is made inextricable from desire for cleanness in another’s soul, and maintenance of cleanness in oneself. Aelred here argues more explicitly what I have identified elsewhere in medieval texts implicitly: that same-sexed desire in and of itself is not counter to the erotic and sexual standards of medieval Christianity. Instead, unclean behavior and attraction for it in others stands as deviant desire. Where same-sexed desire soils the soul, it represents “unnatural” desire. But where, at least according to Aelred, it can instead promote desire for virtue and sameness with that virtue — homospiritual desire — even same-sexed attraction does not necessarily fall outside of “proper” erotics in the Christian Middle Ages. As Damian Boquet so aptly puts it, “The coherence of

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<sup>225</sup> “L’*amicitia carnalis*... possède un statut intrinsèquement ambigu dans la mesure où elle est traversée par la double polarisation de l’*affectus carnalis*, condamnable lorsqu’il aboutit à rendre l’homme esclave de ses passions charnelles, et tolérable lorsqu’il sert de base pour l’ascension vers la vertu.” Damien Boquet, *L’Ordre de l’affect au Moyen Âge: Autour de l’anthropologie affective d’Aelred de Rievaulx* (Caen: CRAHM, 2005), 321.

Aelred's discourse lies in this tension. Once again, if the concept of homosexuality, whether performed or sublimated, is not pertinent to expressing this sensibility, it seems nevertheless to emerge, due to the new status recognized in the carnal man, an original form of masculine sensibility in which sexuality is condemned as illicit without being so much the ultimate element that founds the identity of the individual."<sup>226</sup> As a devout Christian, no matter his investment in "deviant" modes of desire, Aelred leaves every indication of his devotion to seeking spiritual cleanness in traditional terms, and in fact the deviating articulations of same-soul desire in his dialogue conform to this tradition.

Nor do I think even Aelred would argue that male-female reproductive sex was not definitional of lay medieval practices — just as "homosexuality" was not *foundational* to the identity of someone like Aelred, nor any kind of "heterosexuality" foundational to the erotic identity or orientation of opposite-sexed lay people. In short, no relationality of desire or orientation *based* on sexed bodies was the core of sexual identity for medieval Christians. Rather, a homospiritual orientation toward cleanness in others, based on sameness with virtue developed in oneself, typifies the dominant concept of erotic orientation idealized in the Christian Middle Ages, especially it seems in northern Yorkshire and the central Midlands, and delineated here by Aelred.

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<sup>226</sup> "La cohérence du discours d'Aelred tient dans cette tension. Une fois encore, si le concept d'homosexualité, affichée ou sublimée, n'est pas pertinent pour exprimer cette sensibilité, on voit néanmoins émerger, du fait du statut nouveau reconnu à l'homme charnel, une forme originale de sensibilité masculine dans laquelle la sexualité est condamnée comme illicite sans être pour autant l'élément ultime qui fonde l'identité de l'individu." Ibid.

Even in *De spiritali amicitia* Aelred speaks to this, though with a bit more reserve. As he says, when it comes to “worldly friendship... if you avoid childishness and dishonesty, and if nothing shameful spoils such friendship, then in hope of some richer grace this love can be tolerated as a kind of first step toward a holier friendship. As devotion grows with the support of spiritual interests, and as with age maturity increases and the spiritual senses are illumined, then, with affection purified, such friends may mount to higher realms, just as we said yesterday that because of a kind of likeness the ascent is easier from human friendship to friendship with God himself.”<sup>227</sup> The concern that something “shameful spoils such friendship” is left ambiguous, but we needn’t imagine much to conclude that he means any sinful and/or sexual conduct. The phrasing here would seem to suggest a more conservative outlook, whereby rather than allowing “inane compliments or soft tenderness” as steps toward love and practice of virtue, they are to be avoided, even if contemplated. Aelred’s core stance seems however intact: that the potentiality of generally erotic or even sexual desire for another — even of bodily sameness — is not only permissible but may be useful as a means of eventually fostering a proper kind of friendship, a desire for one another oriented by and toward spiritual cleanness, and a joint desire to love god.

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<sup>227</sup> “Amicitia haec carnalium est... quae tamen, exceptis nugis et mendaciis, si nulla intercesserit inhonestas, spe uberis gratiae toleranda est, quasi quaedam amicitiae sanctioris principia; quibus crescente religione et spiritalium studiorum parilitate, accedente etiam maturioris aetatis grauitate et spiritalium sensuum illuminatione, purgatori affectu ad altiora, quasi e uicino conscendant; sicut hesternae die ab hominis ad Dei ipsius amicitiam, ob quamdam similitudinem diximus facilius transeundum.” Aelredi Rievallensis, “de Spiritali Amicitia,” c. 3.87. While I have checked the precise meanings of desire I am discussing against the original Latin, for expedience’s sake, the translation here is from Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Institute Publications, 2010).

In highlighting the presence and utility of erotic potentiality in friendship, Aelred is perhaps more conservative in *de Spiritali Amicitia* because as he recounts in the dialogue, the possibility of it “spilling over” weighs on his mind. Like Jacques de Vitry or Christina of Stommeln, also leading chaste lives, Aelred recounts his own episode of concern. Like them, he builds an intimate relationship with one for whom he feels a homospiritually driven erotic orientation, that risks focusing into physical, though not necessarily sexual, desire, and risks rupturing the very cleanness of his chaste identity on which his spiritual sameness is built.

Aelred recounts of a friend for whom he cared deeply that “first, the contemplation of his virtues turned my affection toward him.... From that time, by his conquest of the flesh and endurance of toil and hunger, he was an example to some, admiration of many, and my own pride and joy. From the beginning I thought he should be trained in the principles of friendship, since I regarded him as a burden to no one and a delight to all.”<sup>228</sup> As Aelred advocates for others, his desire for his anonymous companion stemmed from “the contemplation of his virtues.” As this friend increased the cleanness of his soul, so too it seems did Aelred’s appreciation for its expression, including in “conquest of the flesh.” As with Jacques’s attraction for Marie, the rejection of bodily

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<sup>228</sup> “primum quidem uirtutum eius contemplatio illi meum inclinavit affectum.... Ex tunc ipse uictor corporis, laboris etiam et inediae patiens, plurimis exemplo fuit, admirationi multis, mihi gloriae et delectationi. Et iam tunc eum in amicitiae principiis nutriendum putavi; utpote quem onerosum nulli, sed omnibus gratum intuebar.” Ibid. 3.120. As above, while I have checked the precise meanings of desire I am discussing against the original Latin, for expedience’s sake, the translation here is from Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Institute Publications, 2010).

pleasure, including the sexual, is a chief sign of cleanness in the soul of their desire — but one which in turn seems to risk slippage from a divinely-directed spiritual or even erotic desire, to a worldly pleasure.

As Aelred recounts, “Once upon a time, when I desired to grant him some physical alleviation, because he was now becoming infirm, he forbade it with his caution: that our love should not be measured according to the comfort of the flesh, lest this be attributed more to my carnal affection than to his need and that thus my authority might be eroded.”<sup>229</sup> What Aelred does *not* indicate explicitly, unlike Jacques, is an outright sexual response to his friend’s cleanness. There may be insinuation of sexual desire or arousal, but I am chiefly concerned with what we can know with relative certainty. And here Aelred speaks only of “physical alleviation” as a “comfort of the flesh.” Innuendo was certainly not absent from medieval writing, but given the seriousness with which religious like Aelred took physical comfort, generally, as a worldly pleasure — and the contextual indication tying this “comfort of the flesh” to his friend “becoming infirm,” it seems likely that here Aelred speaks principally of alleviating pain or discomfort by aiding with physical mobility or other activity. Even his mention of “carnal affection” seems more likely reference to desire for another’s worldly presence, in apposition to desire for another’s soul.

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<sup>229</sup> “Volebam ei aliquando aliquid de his temporalibus, quia iam infirmabatur, praebere solatium; sed ille prohibebat cauendum dicens: ne amor noster secundum hanc carnis consolationem metiretur; ne id magis carnali affectui meo quam eius necessitati ascriberetur, et sic mea auctoritas minueretur.” Ibid. 3.126. Again, I have checked the precise meanings of desire I am discussing against the original Latin, for expedience’s sake, the translation here is from Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Institute Publications, 2010).

Nevertheless, *because* Aelred took even physical pleasure or attraction seriously, as a distraction from a desire for spiritually clean sameness of soul, this seems analogous to Jacques's and Christina's concerns that were likewise about worldly pleasure, even if more specifically sexual. And, surely, that physical affection and alleviation could slip quickly into sexual affection and pleasure must not have been far from Aelred's mind, just as the kind of shift that Jacques experienced, from his mere physical touch on Marie's hand to the "primal stirring" he then experienced for her of sexual arousal. Aelred would have been fully aware of the potential for slippage from physical desire and pleasure to sexual desire and pleasure, and the rapidity of the latter following from the former. Certainly, sexual desire could even be considered a subcategory of physical desire.

They operate, then, in the same constellation of desire as friendship, according to Aelred. Their potentiality makes them always and never there, in the elusive erotic realm, and thus inextricable from friendship (counter to what McGuire has asserted). Such nuances of desire, according to Aelred, are to be recognized but controlled, followed but never followed through. The desire orienting one's attraction and action need not include the sexual or even the physical, realized, in order to be erotic. For what could be more intimate, desirous, between two souls than a spiritual affection — especially in a society in which the ultimate experience of the soul, not the body, determined the lines one tried to trace in the world. For Aelred, "deviation is ultimately to be eliminated; but the unstable, deviating loves of youth are the first step toward that perfect stability of



eternity...”<sup>230</sup> *De spiritali amicitia* demonstrates Aelred’s investment both personally and professingly that such unclean desires are points on the straight line between homospiritual desire for cleanness in another, on one end, and love of God, on the other.

Moving from his queered exegesis in book one of his dialogue, to his contemplation of attraction to virtue and aspiration for it personally in books two and three, Aelred derives that this ideal, spiritually-oriented relationship — and the pleasure that comes from it — “begins with Christ, is advanced through Christ, and is perfected in Christ.”<sup>231</sup> As opposed to reproductive lines of living that take place in time and on earth, in this mode of being, divine love is the inspiration of desire, its beginning, as well as the result of desire, its end, and its pleasure is spiritual, not genital.

This spiritual *jouissance*, then, is both allowed by and effects a temporality assembled not from reproductive aims and acts, or any physical or sexual enjoyment therewith, but ones of spiritual pleasure. In the queer space Aelred constructs in his dialogue, where the first two humans in Genesis are created equally, and the gendered differences that subtend reproductive life are deemphasized, even grammatically deleted, he suggests space in a postlapsarian world for the true, spiritual friendship of a prelapsarian utopia. In other words, sex-less relationality, in both senses of the word, is integral to eden (and heaven?). If reproduction is meaningless outside of time, and reproduction itself then, in a sense, is meaningless, then sexed difference is meaningless,

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<sup>230</sup> Sturges, *Dialogue and Deviance*, 63.

<sup>231</sup> “Quae omnia a Christo inchoantur, per Christum promouentur, in Christo perficiuntur,” *Ibid.*, 2.20 (306).

and thus hetero-genital sexual pleasure — even bodily pleasure at large — is meaningless. Evoking the prelapsarian freedom from reproductive teleology, Aelred's conception of a utopian space makes time for a spiritual *jouissance* whereby desire, including male-male affection, follows temporal lines toward unity with God. Past (Eden), present (the monastery), and a utopian futurity coalesce as an alternative to lay, reproductive time.

We thus might consider the “natural” associations that medieval Christians made between genital form and hetero-bodied desire to exert less of a pull on people like Aelred not just because their cloistered lives were physically removed, but also because they lived at a different pace, removed from the orbit of a postlapsarian, reproductive temporality. This deviance of knowing the orientation of desire was enabled by the low pull exerted by traditional modes of attraction within the frame of reference of the dialogue or the enclosed, religious space. Not far from the edenic temporality of Rievaulx, another text likewise suggested such an epistemology of desire. And while it employed the more straightening romance genre as in the Midlands, it nevertheless offered models of homospiritual desire that deviate from, though do not oppose, bodily bases of desire.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE MANOR AROUND THE CORNER

Miklós László's 1937 play, *Illatszertár*, adapted for the screen three years later into the Lubitsch comedy of manners, *The Shop Around the Corner*, seems a queerly appropriate analogue for the story of Rievaulx Abby and its Thornton neighbors. The film at once evokes the extracorporeal erotic orientation expressed in these medieval letters, as well as the worldly, territorial conflict amidst the affinity of ideals shared by Aelred's Rievaulx and the gentry Thornton family, whose estate and manor house lay nearby. In Ernst Lubitsch's 1940 film rendition, Jimmy Stewart's Alfred Kralik, slick salesman at a leathershop in Budapest, has struck up a romantic correspondence with an anonymous woman from a newspaper personal ad. In the manner of the comedy, the audience knows the woman — whose intellect through letters Kralik has fallen for — to be his coworker at the shop, Margaret Sullavan's Klara Novak. And while Klara is likewise enamored with her cultured correspondent, something about Stewart's drawl apparently turned her off, as the two quarrel in the shop furiously. Eventually Kralik, through loyal service to his superior, is elevated in social rank and income from sales clerk to managerial strata — the parallels to Middle English romances are not to be missed. The errors play themselves out, identities are revealed, and the two's corporeal incompatibility is reconciled with the soulful sameness in their epistolary romance.

The utility of the analogue here is twofold. For one, that Kralik and Novak are presented as having fallen in love — having never sized up one another’s bodies — via an exchange of intellectual and emotional (perhaps spiritual?) energies reminds that it was not so long ago that the sexed body was not necessarily so idealized in establishing attraction. Even less than an hundred years after the psychologizing and pathologizing of straight and deviant identities along lines of genitalia, nothing about the establishment of a romance without bodies is presented as unusual. And while Stewart and Sullavan certainly fit norms of mainstream bodily attraction in the 1940s West, László via Lubitsch certainly makes clear that their erotic desire, while not divorced fully from corporeality, has its basis in something other.

At the same time, one wonders that Novak’s personal ad, precursor to contemporary online dating profiles, could not be further from today’s Tinder, OkCupid, Growler, Grindr, Blendr, Bumble, PickE, Happn, Clover, Hinge, ad nauseam. Where the above laundry list of dating apps and online profiles rely either exclusively or initially on “swiping” right or left on one’s screen, like or dislike based on pictures of users’ *bodies*, Klara Novak’s personal ad in the paper left nothing but what incorporeal character might be presented in letters for Mr. Kralik to feel attraction for.<sup>232</sup> And beyond that, this out-of-body experience of each other is what orients their romantic, even erotic, desires toward one another as they corresponded. Unarticulated in contemporary mainstream sexuality,

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<sup>232</sup> Hinge, interestingly, has relaunched itself with a new form factor, in which “likes” and “matches” may be as likely based on a textual presentation of oneself as on a pictorial one. Kralik’s type of correspondence is, perhaps, making a comeback in line with medieval acorporeal desire.

such an incorporeal romance yet rings in harmony with the experiences of today's sapiosexuals particularly, even demisexuals, pansexuals, bisexuals, and other queer folx. In this sense, the erotics of these mid-century Budapesters and those of so many queer folx today bear more resemblance to those evident in Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship* and the romances compiled by Robert Thornton, discussed below, than they do to contemporary mainstream bases of sexuality. In this sense the portrayal of erotic orientation in the mid-twentieth century seems almost "medieval" when compared to the dominant erotics of today, so grounded in likeness and difference of genitalia and body. The romance in *The Shop Around the Corner* does not begin as a heterosexual one, in the modern sense, but simply as a, say, homo-intellectual one, or dare I say, homospiritual.

*The Shop Around the Corner*, for another analogue, dovetails modernity with the antagonistic yet accentuating relationship over the years between Aelred's Rievaulx Abbey and the Thornton family, whose manor at East Newton stood a mere six miles away. While the Thorntons had two separate disputes with the abbey over land, between 1160 and 1170 during Aelred's tenure, unlike some two dozen others, who sought secular solutions, they resolved the dispute by a quitclaim and a swearing of an oath, as a family, before the alter *in* the Abbey church at Rievaulx.<sup>233</sup> While there is certainly no demonstrable intertextuality between Aelred's epistemology on friendship and desire, the proximity and affinity between these families religious and lay sets the scene of homospiritual expression in the North Riding of Yorkshire.

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<sup>233</sup> Jamroziak, E., *Rievaulx Abbey and its Social Context, 1132–1300: Memory, Locality, and Networks* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 117–120.

Aelred's writings, as discussed in the previous chapter, and Thornton's romances, both evince the same kind of noncorporeal bases of attraction — in their case squarely spiritual — as do Novak and Kralik. Like the lovers of the film, these two parties represent an extracorporeal spirituality, and likewise do so in writing. But more basically yet critically, their spiritual affinity persists in letters, while their physical selves begin as next-door nemeses, only to be reconciled by a fusion of spiritual affinity in bodily presence. As Novak and Kralik are quarreling coworkers who reconcile their differences through the intellectual connection they've eroticized, the Thorntons and Rievaulx Abbey, engaged in a land dispute during Aelred's lifetime, compete in the corporeal realm while sharing an ethic of spiritual erotics in letters, to then resolve the dispute at the Abbey church's alter, spiritually — the extratemporal energy that for each bore at times an erotic load.

Of the texts Robert chose to include in his compendium, two in particular — *Sir Degrevant* and *Octavian*— reflect the same kind of homospiritually guided conception of desire detailed by Aelred only a few miles away. The manuscript itself, Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91, more commonly known as the Thornton Manuscript, was compiled around the middle of the fifteenth century. The identity of the scribe and original owner is almost certainly the aforementioned Robert Thornton of the North Riding of Yorkshire, a member of the landed gentry, lord of the manor of East Newton

from 1418 until his death, sometime before 1465.<sup>234</sup> The holograph manuscript consists of sixty-four items written in one hand over 321 folios.<sup>235</sup> There are several apparent sources, and it is believed that none of the manuscript's contents are Thornton's original work.<sup>236</sup> Over a third of the contents are explicitly religious texts, not an insignificant number, and the remainder, including the romances discussed below, are themselves rather religiously inflected.<sup>237</sup>

*Sir Degrevant* survives in only one other manuscript, Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.1.6 (the Findern Manuscript, mid-fourteenth century).<sup>238</sup> It has no known source, although L. F. Casson speculates that other stories, such as the *Erle of Tolous* — included in the Thornton Manuscript as it is in Cambridge 2.28 and Ashmole 61 — may have influenced its author.<sup>239</sup> *Octavian* survives in only one other manuscript, Cambridge Ff.2.38 (discussed in a previous chapter), although a quite different parallel redaction referred to as the “Southern” *Octavian* survives in London, British Library MS Cotton

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<sup>234</sup> Robert Thornton, *The Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91) [Facsimile]*, introductions by D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen (London: The Scolar Press, 1975), viii; William Page, “Stonegrave,” *The Victoria History of the County of York North Riding* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), 561–66 (563). Cf. Ben Ambler, “Idealized Manhood in English Household Romances.”

<sup>235</sup> Brewer, introduction to *The Thornton MS facsimile*, xii, xx.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>238</sup> L. F. Casson ed., “Introduction,” in *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*, The Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press: 1949), ix–lxxv, xi.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, lxii ff.

Caligula A.2 (c. 1446–1460).<sup>240</sup> Both versions likely descend through two lost English versions derived from a surviving, substantially longer Old French *Octavian*, written around 1250.<sup>241</sup>

Thanks to Thornton’s signature and the certainty of his holograph’s provenance in his Yorkshire manor, some general inferences may be confidently made about the historical, real-life horizon of expectations of Thornton and the members of his gentry household.<sup>242</sup> Philippa Hardman asserts that the manuscript was “apparently serving [Thornton’s] own and perhaps like minded friends’ literary, devotional, and medical interests.”<sup>243</sup> Given the assortment of texts in the manuscript, it is reasonable to assume that the codex was read or heard by members of Thornton’s immediate family and household. Moreover, “some scribbles may be by [Robert Thornton’s] son William Thornton, whose name appears among the notes on f. 49v,” making this assumption seem

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<sup>240</sup> Harriet Hudson, ed., “Octavian: Introduction,” in *Four Middle English Romances*, second edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), 39–43 (43).

<sup>241</sup> Frances McSparran, ed., “Introduction,” in *Octavian*, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1–68 (10); Hudson, “Octavian: Introduction,” 39. For an unpublished edition of the Old French version, see Robert P. Smith Jr., *A Study of the Old French Romance of Octavian*, Dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1969).

<sup>242</sup> See, for example, fols. 93v, 98v, 129v, 196v, 211v, and 213.

<sup>243</sup> Philippa Hardman, “Compiling the Nation: Fifteenth-century Miscellany Manuscripts,” in *Nation, Court, and Culture: New Essays in Fifteenth-century English Poetry*, ed., Helen Coony (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2001), 50–69 (51).



all the more plausible.<sup>244</sup> Because one may be relatively certain of the gentry status of the audience of the Thornton manuscript's household romances, the work of Ruth Mazo Karras and Raluca Radulescu provide reasonable insight into how, as with the manuscripts possessed by tradespeople in the Midlands, the Thornton Manuscript would have held a straightening course on the desires and erotic orientations among its audience.

Romances such as *Degrevant* would have done much to reinforce the status quo of erotic behavior already in place in late medieval England, especially for men. As Karras explains, "in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries young men might be educated in knightly skills and behavior within their fathers' households, but more likely in the household of another: an uncle or other relative, a patron of the father's... Here they would have heard the romances they were to emulate."<sup>245</sup> Young gentry boys, fostered in the households of gentry other than their parents, would have heard romances alongside their surrogate family. This was plausibly the case at East Newton. As gentry boys and young men grew up, they learned from their experiences and from those around them that in order to achieve full majority as a gentleman, one had to demonstrate compliance to

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<sup>244</sup> Brewer, introduction to *The Thornton MS facsimile*, p. vii. I have investigated the "scribbles" to which Brewer refers on fol. 49v, in facsimile. They consist of, among other things, fragments of Latin and rows of the same letter, their forms copied over and over. William's signature appears at the bottom of the page, and the hand overall does appear distinct from that on the adjacent folios.

<sup>245</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 29.

gentry ethics.<sup>246</sup> A young gentleman would learn that dominant forms of adult gentry masculinity ought to include “religious devotions and pious benefactions, the enjoyment of treasures of art,” but also “hard exercise in the hunting field, fighting and bloodshed in war, and the role of a civil governor in national or local affairs.”<sup>247</sup>

The characteristic of properly conducting oneself as a member of the gentry, *gentillesse*, involved keeping order inside and outside the home, and distinguishing oneself through decorous behavior aligning with gentry ethics — particularly piety. By studying epistolary evidence, Radulescu has shown how the concerns of gentry families “mostly centered around the notion of preserving personal and the family’s worship [sic., i.e., familial worship], cultivating gentle manners, including good governance of the household and political behaviour in the locality, as well as keeping and improving alliances through marriage and through business contracts.”<sup>248</sup> Dutiful Christian devotion was a major part of proper gentry conduct. Robert Thornton’s interest in this model of behavior seems particularly present in light of *Degrevant*’s narrative, considered below. And while the commonly associated knightly qualities of prowess, obedience, and estate-claiming are manifest throughout, *Degrevant* evidences a conception of primarily homospiritual desire, at the same time modeling it as a “straight” ethic for its audiences.

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<sup>246</sup> Raluca Radulescu, “Literature,” in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, Manchester Medieval Studies (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 103; Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 33.

<sup>247</sup> Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London: Methuen, 1984), 210.

<sup>248</sup> Radulescu, “Literature,” 101.

### *Turning Gaze on the Ceiling*

*Sir Degrevant* manages to at once conform to its generic responsibilities and present a number of idiosyncrasies.<sup>249</sup> The story begins when the knight Degrevant is recalled from crusade because a neighboring earl, his social superior, has begun pillaging Degrevant's territory and attacking his tenants. One might expect a knight of romance to retaliate promptly, but Degrevant demonstrates a more restrained pugnacity, one reined in by social propriety. Rather than attack, Degrevant writes a letter to the earl, requesting he cease his encroachment on the knight's territory. This more pragmatic, real-world response evocative of how the Thorntons and Rievaulx dealt with their own property dispute is part of what leads A. S. G. Edwards to remark on such idiosyncrasies, that *Degrevant* is characterized by "its relative narrative restraint in its eschewing of the hyperbolically implausible" feats of superhuman strength, valiant clashes with fanciful beasts, and Christian miracles.<sup>250</sup> On the other hand, most of the narrative aspects familiar from other romances pervade and, in fact, W. A. Davenport describes it as a composite of several other narrative models.<sup>251</sup> Like many Middle English romances, the plot is driven

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<sup>249</sup> *The Romance of Sir Degrevant: A Parallel-text Edition from MSS. Lincoln Cathedral A.5.2 and Cambridge University Ff.1.6*, ed. L. F. Casson, EETS o.s. 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>250</sup> A. S. G. Edwards, "Gender, Order, and Reconciliation in *Sir Degrevant*," in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 53–64 (54).

<sup>251</sup> W. A. Davenport, "Sir Degrevant and Composite Romance," *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, eds. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 111–131.

by action and movement, with little introspection, though with a few irregular passages of description. Much of this generic regularity proceeds once, expectedly, the earl rejects Degrevant's written request, and continues his rapine of the knight's lands.

As he repeatedly battles the earl, Degrevant catches sight of his daughter, Melidor, whose physical beauty Degrevant certainly notes, but whose true arousing characteristic for Degrevant is soon revealed to have far more to do with the knight's homospiritual orientation than his hetero-sexed inclinations. Over the course of the following year, Degrevant secretly visits Melidor in her bower by night — where he becomes truly attracted to her through her piety — and continually, without effort, defeats the earl in battle by day. Eventually, these visits are exposed, and Melidor and her mother together convince the earl to cease his private war with the knight and award Melidor to Degrevant in marriage. But among notable features of restraint, feminine agency, and literacy throughout the poem, it also realizes at length the true object of Degrevant's attraction, Melidor's soul. Consistent with contemporaneous understanding of how one might know and feel another's inner piety, Degrevant is oriented by outward signs and symbols of Melidor's spiritual cleanness, and the sameness of soul he might have with her. Using ekphrasis, a textual rendering of visual art, the poem builds a picture of the kind of spiritually clean femininity that its male audiences may gaze at directly, and its female audiences may emulate. The result is a vivid portrayal of an object of homospiritual desire that straightens its audiences' ideas of attraction, as with *Erle of*

*Tolous* or *Bevis of Hampton*, and provides us a clear, frame-by-frame window of what an idealized late-medieval Christian man oriented himself toward.

For his own part, Degrevant is demonstrably clean of soul. The poem opens with a prolonged, six-stanza description of the knight's character; right out of the gate, he is a knight of the Round Table who demonstrates his reach for *imitatio Christi* through his armed deeds of prowess across Europe and, specifically, in "heathen lands."<sup>252</sup> When at home, moreover, every day he begins rising before dawn to hunt and hawk — after which "Then he went to hear his Mass / Truly with good will..."<sup>253</sup> Not only does he attend mass every morning, but the poem emphasizes that he does it not out of compulsion or habit, but genuine dedication. Outside of the church, even, "he well-loved almsgiving, / clothing and feeding poor people / with dignity and compassion."<sup>254</sup>

But more than these signs of general piety, seriously as they may serve as outward signs of Degrevant's inner piety, the opening description connects the knight's cleanness directly to marriage, and sexuality. At least at the outset of the romance, before meeting the utterly clean soul of Melidor, Degrevant "certainly, would take no wife, / nor

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<sup>252</sup> "hethenesse," *Degrevant*, 21. On battle prowess and survival as *imitatio Christi*, see Richard W. Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors: the Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>253</sup> "To here hys Mas or he went / Trewly in gode entaunt." *Degrevant*, 53–54.

<sup>254</sup> "He lovede well almosdede, / Powr men to cloth and fede / Wyth menske and manhede." *Ibid.*, 81–83. Note here, that a pious act is made synonymous linguistically with masculinity.

concubine nor mistress, / But as an anchorite in a cell / he lived ever true.”<sup>255</sup> It would seem Degrevant may have spent more of his time on the Round Table with Galahad than with Lancelot — and it is hard to imagine the Thorntons not thinking of their neighbors at Rievaulx, and their own imperative to maintain chaste and spiritually clean ambiance, as they made their way through the poem. At the outset, then, Degrevant is established as a man pious overall and, moreover, in the absence of someone as spiritually clean as himself, he expresses his chaste identity through celibacy. This establishes a clear point of departure from which, later in the poem, Degrevant expresses overt sexual desire, specifically aroused by Melidor’s piety.

As the narrative progresses, the knight is presented with someone seemingly as clean as himself, toward whom he orients his desire. For Degrevant, contemplation of his household of the soul, to be kept properly clean and pious, becomes almost as literal when he takes in Melidor’s bedchamber as the outward signs of her spiritually-clean sameness to his own pious soul. The lines of the poem become just as concerned with the space Melidor occupies as they are with the woman occupying that space, and this is nowhere more explicit than in the scene in which Degrevant first visits Melidor’s bedchamber. The function that Melidor’s space plays in establishing the kind of clean soul to which a man like Degrevant ought to orient himself becomes clear, beginning with narration of the characters’ actions. Melidor meets Degrevant at the door, Degrevant embraces her, chairs and cushions are set out on which they sit face to face. As the two

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<sup>255</sup> “Certus, wyff wold he non, / Wench ne lemon, / Bot as an anker in a ston / He lyved ever trew.” Degrevant, 61–64.

lovers begin to dine on a sumptuous feast, however, action slowly gives way to description until the passage of time in the story comes to a stand-still. The highly action-driven narration is interrupted by a lengthy description of the bedchamber and its decoration. The content of this description, moreover, embodies the characteristics ascribed by the story to “proper,” clean femininity and are themselves what inspire Degrevant to attempt to enact his desire.

The passage is an ekphrasis, a detailed, poetic description of a work of visual art: a painting, a sculpture, architecture.<sup>256</sup> As part of a narrative, the phenomenon is detached from the linear chronology of the plot; ekphrasis freely describes a single moment, or even references the past and future of objects depicted.<sup>257</sup> Thus, as the scene of Degrevant and Melidor’s meal progresses and the actions of their supping give way to descriptions of the board set before them, narrative time slows to a stand-still, freezes into a snapshot, a still-life. Where this passage consists almost entirely of description, the loss of narrated action removes all markers of the passage of time. The details of their meal begin an eight-stanza ekphrasis of Melidor’s bedchamber. Throughout, audiences are guided by the narration to view what is described with their mind’s eye.<sup>258</sup> The first three stanzas

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<sup>256</sup> Robert Epstein, “With man a floryn he the hewes boghte”: Ekphrasis and Symbolic Violence in the *Knight’s Tale*,” *Philological Quarterly* 85:1-2 (2007): 49–68, p. 65n1.

<sup>257</sup> Ruth Webb, “ekphrasis,” Oxford Art Online, <[http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025773?q=ekphrasis&search=quick&source=oao\\_gao&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025773?q=ekphrasis&search=quick&source=oao_gao&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit)>, retrieved 6 Nov. 2010.

<sup>258</sup> Haiko Wandhoff, Ekphrasis: *Kunstabeschreibungen und Virtuelle Räume in der Literatur des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), p. 41.

detail the meal that Melidor sets before Degrevant; the middle two stanzas illustrate the room's ceiling, and the religious imagery on it; the last three stanzas move down the walls of the room to depict Melidor's bed. In its literary medium, the ekphrasis is an image linear in space, though not in time. The audience is led unidirectionally through a tryptic that allows for viewer's initial grounding in the corporeal, but then draws the eye and the soul away from the temporal and to the spiritual, climaxing in suggestions of the sexual: the image begins with the material subject of food and dining, has as its center the religious imagery on the ceiling, and concludes with the corporeally themed bed.

Typically, critical reception of such ekphrases has interpreted them as semiotic images.<sup>259</sup> They are detailed visuals in themselves, but represent something symbolically in the texts in which they appear. Arlyn Diamond argues that the imagery and sheer costliness of the bedchamber here is "a public announcement of the inhabitant's status as female heir."<sup>260</sup> The food Melidor serves is abundant, the chamber is covered floor-to-ceiling in expensive materials (gems, gold, marble, glass, silk), and the king's banner hangs at the head of her bed.<sup>261</sup> All of these accoutrements would certainly be attractive to a knight looking for a wife with whom to start a household. The entire scene, Diamond argues, symbolizes Melidor's status as a woman who will bring her future husband all the

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<sup>259</sup> Epstein, "Ekphrasis and Symbolic Violence," p. 49.

<sup>260</sup> Arlyn Diamond, "Sir Degrevant: what lovers want," *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 82–99, 96.

<sup>261</sup> Ll. 1393–1520. In the Thornton MS, it is her father's banner, perhaps a more poignant sign of her status as patriarchal capital.



wealth of her father's estate.<sup>262</sup> These aspects of the scene certainly do represent attractants to which an advancement-seeking gentry like Degrevant would be oriented. Even on a literal level, when Melidor piles high a supper for which she has spared no expense (1427–8), she demonstrates how she would provide for Degrevant and his household. And a model of knowing and feeling desire guided predominantly by spirituality doubtfully operated divorced from these factors. Even the most pious of knights surely still considered what would best allow him to augment and continue his household — though we should note that Degrevant's celibacy implies such material abundance, alone, is not enough.

Of the three sections of the ekphrasis mentioned above — the food, the religious ceiling, and the bed — the first and last participate in modeling the corporeal factors with which Degrevant might be concerned. The supper seems an unending supply of sustenance, and the bed, built with sensuous materials and decorated with famous scenes of lovers, implies the satisfaction and reproductive success that Melidor would give Degrevant. Moreover, this wealth symbolizes the patriarchal structure into which Degrevant may integrate himself by marrying Melidor.<sup>263</sup> The food is provided out of the Earl's storerooms, and the bed, with the Earl's banner over it, represents how Degrevant might place himself in line for social advancement. The religious imagery on the ceiling, however, is far more than simply one of the symbols that represents the presence of the

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<sup>262</sup> Diamond, "what lovers want," 96.

<sup>263</sup> Diamond, "what lovers want," p. 94–5.

Earl's patriarchy in Melidor's bedchamber. The religious imagery on the ceiling, and Melidor's relationship to it, characterizes attractants in which private devotion is a key component.

Resting at the center of the ekphrastic image, the following two stanzas detailing the religious imagery on the ceiling prescribe that alongside the material contributions that a woman ought to bring to a potential husband's household, there are just as many, if not more, spiritual ones. I reproduce the lines at length, below, in their original Middle English, in an effort to preserve some semblance of the ekphrastic experience. Picture, if you will:

Per was a ryal rooffe 1441

In þe chaumbur of loffe;

Hyt was buskyd a-boue

With besauntus ful bry3th;

All off ruel-bon, 1445

Why3th ogee and parpon,

Mony a dere-wroþe stone,

Endentyd and dy3th;

Per men my3th se ho þat wolde,

Arcangelus of rede golde, 1450

Fyfty mad of o molde,

Lowynge ful lyghth.  
 With þe Pocalyps of Jon,  
 Þe Powlus Pystolus euerychon,  
 Þe Parabolus of Salamon 1455  
 Payntyd ful ry3th.  
  
 And þe foure Gospellorus  
 Syttyng on pyllorus,  
 Hend, herkenþ and herus,  
 Gyf hyt be 3oure wyll. 1460  
 Austyn and Gregory,  
 Jerome and Ambrose,  
 Þus þe foure doctorus;  
 Lysten þam tulle.  
 Þere was purtred in ston 1465  
 Þe fylesoferus everychon,  
 Þe story of Absolon  
 That layked ful ylle;  
 With an orrelegge on hy3th,  
 To rynge þe ours at ny3th, 1470  
 To waken Myldore þe bry3th

With bellus to knylle.<sup>264</sup>

The centerpiece of the ekphrastic still-life, these religious images on the ceiling of Melidor's bedchamber are truly exceptional: aside from fifty archangels, the ceiling depicts Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four doctors of the Church, and the classical philosophers whose work gained significance to medieval theology. Most notably — depicted either in text or image, the Middle English can be taken either way — the ceiling is covered in Scripture: the book of Proverbs, the Apocalypse, and *every one* of Paul's epistles.

Taken for their material accidentance as parts of an ekphrastic description of the artwork on the ceiling, these images stand for socio-religious culture, and symbolize patriarchy in the way that Diamond argues. However, there is more going on here. These image-texts on the ceiling are part of a larger ekphrastic image within the scene. They, along with the ekphrases of the walls and the bed, become the background of a diorama, a background in front of which stands Melidor, the model of "proper," pious femininity, replete with spiritual cleanness.

Consider the last four lines of the two stanzas on the ceiling: a description of a clock, sitting high on the wall, that rings the hours at night in order to wake Melidor with the ringing of its bells. As the text portrays her, Melidor is a woman whose bedroom ceiling is covered with religious imagery and scripture, not exclusively as symbols of

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<sup>264</sup> *Degrevant*, line numbers indicate marginally.

patriarchy, but also as media for her own private devotion. Alone in her chamber, Melidor habitually wakes throughout the night, implicitly to pray the hours. Her father's banner over her bed may represent her status as heir, but the adornments of her ceiling and her implied use of them speak to a deeply personal, devotional function served by the chamber. It is, in a sense, her private chapel — or, in direct parallel to the “anchorite” Degrevant introduced at the start of the poem, her anchoress's cell. Either way, the image demonstrates the cleanness of her soul beyond reproach. This image, rendered in writing on the wall, so to speak, marks Melidor as a safe woman of spiritual cleanness with whom someone like Degrevant might attain a sameness of soul toward his own salvation. She is desirable to him not only for the material contributions she will provide to his household, but also because of her extreme devotion. Where the bodily senses are such open conduits to the soul, the sight of Melidor's purity through ekphrasis becomes a powerful mode of prescribing a model of pious femininity, and desire therefor.

Moreover, as the ekphrasis unfolds, this visual becomes the heart of the overall image. In a diorama backgrounded by sumptuous food, religious figures, Scripture, and a sensuous bed, a praying Melidor is the focal point in the foreground. Guided linearly through the ekphrasis, the mind's eye is directed first to the material food Melidor may provide for a household; then, away from this corporeality to the piety implied by a devout woman in prayer; finally, on the far side of this spiritual center, the ekphrasis returns to the physical and concludes with the sexual and reproductive implications of the bed. While claiming any origin in Aelred's writings seems far-fetched, the progression of

the ekphrasis certainly aligns, on the one hand, with his allowance that spiritual friendship — of which he considered marriage an example — might allowably begin in the corporeal and, on the other hand, that any desire most properly proceeds from a feeling of spiritual sameness to another clean, God-loving soul. Overall, this grand ekphrasis, built around the image of Melidor praying at night, prescribes her as a model of what one should be, and of to whom one ought to be oriented. It does so, on the one hand, through its specificity, and on the other, through Degrevant's gaze upon it.

In line with Edward's observation that the text is more than a bit unusual for its genre, *Degrevant* conforms to some extent with contemporary writer's advice to "show rather than tell." Typically in Middle English romance, characters and spaces receive little or no description. As opposed to the bedroom scene from *Sir Degrevant*, it would be unsurprising to find in a romance simply that "a knight met a maiden and went into her bedchamber." As Stephen Atkinson has argued, when presented with generic signifiers for ideas such as "maiden" and "bedchamber," audiences of romance are invited to paint in the characters and spaces of fiction with details from their own lives, their own horizons of expectation.<sup>265</sup> A generically named "maiden," then, may be imagined as someone the reader knows — or even, given a female reader, herself. Likewise, a woman's bedchamber may be imagined in the mind's eye as a room of one's own, or at least similar. Based on those maidens and bedchambers encountered in real life,

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<sup>265</sup> Atkinson, Stephen. "From the Familiar and the Exotic and Back Again: Reading Location in the Quests of Malory's *Morte*," Annual Medieval Studies Symposium, The Medieval Studies Institute, Indiana University – Bloomington (Bloomington, IN: 26–27 March, 2010).

audiences become familiar with their characteristics and begin to remember those that repeat.<sup>266</sup> When they then encounter in literature a generic signifier without description of its own, they construct their understanding of the concept based upon the expectations that they have developed from their life-experience. In certain romances, such as *Sir Degrevant*, however, this is not possible.

Where such a detailed description of Melidor and her bedchamber exists in the text, any individual notions of “maiden” or “bedchamber” that an audience might have are denied. Instead of allowing readers and listeners to imagine the woman and her space in the style of themselves and/or their own spaces, the poem insists on a particular model of femininity, and desire therefor, embodied in Melidor, and reflected in her bedchamber. The message is clear, and vivid in its ekphrastic splendor: a “proper” woman will provide well for a man’s household, materially but moreover spiritually. She will bring the wealth of her father to the table, but more importantly provide a spiritually pure domestic environment, even in herself.

This message is reenforced by Degrevant’s gaze upon the model. As in so many cases, description is often superseded by action in verifying desire, and Melidor’s devotion as the substance of Degrevant’s desire is made clear just so. As the ekphrasis concludes, and the passage of time returns to the poem, Degrevant immediately pleads with Melidor, “My heart will burst for love! / When will you bring me peace? / Lady,

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<sup>266</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Mahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 88.

show me your best, / Give it by your will.”<sup>267</sup> Having just been exposed to everything described in the ekphrastic diorama of Melidor’s bedchamber, Degrevant feels he can no longer bear the wait, and he begs her for “it” — and in case there might be any confusions about what that “it” is, Melidor’s reply leaves no ambiguity: “Certainly, even if you were a king, / You will come to no such thing / Until you wed me with a ring, / And fulfill marriage.”<sup>268</sup> The Middle English here, “touchest,” for the sense of “come to” reinforces the distinct shift that has just occurred in this moment. Only now, after he has observed the outward signs of Melidor’s inner cleanness of soul, does he desire physical, sexual contact. Degrevant may have long admired her beauty, desired the material manners in which she would add to his worldly household, but it is the cleanness that intimate proximity to her would contribute to his own spiritual household that incites sexual desire in him — or, at the very least, arouses it to a level at which he no longer contains it to his interior thoughts. This is a character far, far removed from his celibate, “anchoritic” state at the start of the poem — and it was desire for a soul of spiritually-clean sameness that brought him here, from cell-bound knight to sexual excitement.

Degrevant’s desirous reaction to these characteristics of Melidor — her material provision but, centrally, her piety — further insists on the propriety lent to Melidor’s model femininity by its specificity. As far as the romance of *Sir Degrevant* is concerned,

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<sup>267</sup> For loue my hert wyl to-brest; / When wylt þou bryng me to rest? / Lady, wysse me þe best, / Gyf hyt be þi wyll” *Degrevant*, 1525–8.

<sup>268</sup> Sertes, tho thou were a kyng, / Thou touchest non swych thing / Or thou wed me with a ryng, / And maryage fulfyller,” *Ibid.*, 1533–1536.



a gentry maiden ideally has the characteristics of Melidor, expressed through her behavior and the signs of her piety reflected in her bedchamber and her interaction with it. Moreover, the poem draws straight lines along which a reader might draw their own orientation of desire. Embodied by an ekphrasis, rather than mere description, this model becomes more than simply a dictation of propriety to be understood conceptually. Degrevant's visit to Melidor's bedchamber is not just a story that audience members may compare to their own lives. It is, instead, an intimate vision that readers and listeners experience directly, without the protagonist's point of view as a medium. Both text on the page and word in the ear are transformed into a visual reality in the mind. Through the detail of this image and the male gaze upon it, the poem insists upon a certain femininity, demands its praxis. In this model and its portrayal as ultimately attractive, it participates in the same straightening enterprise as other romances, representing a homospiritual orientation of desire for its contemporary audiences to follow, and for us to consider.

#### *Alt-Love*

In stark contrast to tales like *Degrevant* or *Bevis of Hampton* and *Erle of Tolous*, *Octavian* presents homospiritual ways of knowing and being, problematized. Instead of focusing on a sequence in which a knight desires only a Christian individual of clean soul, *Octavian* spends the majority of its narrative on desire gone awry — at least so far as social and spiritual ideals of late medieval Christendom are concerned. In short, the protagonist Florent demonstrates erotic orientation along hetero-spiritual lines, for a

Muslim woman, in a sort of mirror to Josian's initial orientation in *Bevis of Hampton*. But where Josian changes her orientation, by way of changing her spiritual state from Muslim to Christian, "dirty" to "clean," here the protagonist, Florent, is ever-comfortable in his spiritual difference from his object of desire. Typical romances revolve around the social and spiritual perfection of their protagonists, affirmed by their wedding of maidens, begetting of children, and ascension of rank, but *Octavian* leaves this for its eponym — and instead focuses on the flawed Florent as its protagonist. And while Florent is skilled with a sword like his fellow protagonists in other romances, he suffers many martial failings, inherits no estate, and bears no heirs. Florent's failings, however, and his deviant desire, allow us to reflect on precisely where the core of other medieval protagonists' successes is portrayed: in their soul.

While Florent possesses the ability of any romance knight, he heterospiritually desires a Muslim maiden. His subsequent attempts to pursue this attraction themselves deviate him from the path of idealized success. And while he does eventually "get the girl," and she converts before marriage, something is left rotten in the state of Florent, and the narrative does not award him the temporal successes that typically in romances signify that inner success of the clean soul. The narrative, ultimately, reveals that outcomes are not all that matter, and it is the course of desire, how one orients oneself as opposed to how one's desire climaxes, that truly matters.

The story begins with a calumniated queen trope.<sup>269</sup> The Roman emperor, Octavian the elder, exiles his wife and twin sons — Octavian the younger and Florent — after she is falsely accused of adultery. Not long after, Florent is separated from his mother and brother. The latter two are taken in by the king of Jerusalem who fosters the young Octavian. Florent, on the other hand, is taken in by a Parisian merchant, who raises the boy as his own. The resulting tale focuses primarily on Florent as he rejects his merchant upbringing and then, lacking training in knightly practices and ethics, falters in his chivalric exploits. Unlike the chaste desire of Jacques or Aelred, or the knightly devotion to purity extant in tales like *Sir Degrevant*, *Bevis of Hampton*, or *Erl of Tolous*, Florent exhibits a disinterest in distancing his soul from alleged contaminants, and instead exhibits an overwhelming heterospiritual desire for a “Saracen” maiden.

When a sultan and his army attack Paris, Florent battles and vanquishes the sultan’s giant, a feat that elicits the attention of the Muslim Marsebele, the sultan’s daughter. Florent admires her (as she does him), and quickly becomes obsessed with the woman. Florent is, in this sense, the direct antithesis to Bevis. Where the latter exhibited panic at the thought of proximity to a non-Christian, Florent becomes obsessed with the spiritually-different woman. And it is precisely at this point — when Florent orients himself to someone who would be considered categorically unclean by Christian standards, that things go awry. Without a properly homospirital mode of being, as the

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<sup>269</sup> Other such stories of a wife accused and/or exiled include the previously discussed *Erl of Tolous*, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, and other Constance narratives. *Octavian* is also what Stephen Knight calls a family-based romance.

story presents, Florent is unable to achieve any of the feats typically expected of him, or attain any of the goals idealized for his knightly station.

Kept from sleep by thoughts of Marsebele, Florent contrives a message for the sultan and rides out of the city to deliver it so that he may catch a glimpse of the ostensibly unclean maiden. He lies to the sultan that “The king of France sent me here” and further pretends that the king has threatened the sultan with battle lest he break camp and withdraw his army.<sup>270</sup> Florent steals a glimpse of Marsebele, but because of his misrepresentation of his king, the sultan attacks Paris the following day. In the resulting battle, “So many people went to their death there / That steeds waded in the blood / That flowed on the ground as a stream.”<sup>271</sup> Moreover, “The Christian men became so few / That they could not win the field.”<sup>272</sup> Only through god’s grace and some assistance from Florent are the Christians able to hold off the “Saracen” onslaught.

But Florent’s eventual aid in the battle should not belie his detrimental role, distracted from proper action by his deviant, heterospiritual desire for the “impure” Marsebele. Unlike Degrevant or other knights of romance who seem to consider battle and guarding against conflict when possible as means to a pious union with someone of “clean” Christian soul, Florent misrepresents his king, lies, and incites a battle for

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<sup>270</sup> “the kyng of France hedir sende,” Harriet Hudson, ed., “Octavian,” *Four Middle English Romances* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), ll. 1331–38.

<sup>271</sup> So many folke thore to the dyde yode / That stedis wode in the blode / That stremyd one the grounde,” “Octavian,” ll. 1457–59)

<sup>272</sup> The Crysten men bycome so thyn / That the felde myghte thay noghte wyn,” “Octavian,” ll. 1466–67.

proximity to what would be considered a spiritual contaminant to his own Christian soul. Because he desires a mere glimpse of Marsebele, he misrepresents his lord by falsifying a message from the French king. This message, in turn, provokes a battle in which many Christians lose their lives. The narrative outlines a clear cause and effect: Florent desires deviantly, directing his attentions toward spiritual difference, his Christian body oriented toward a non-Christian soul. As a result, so many of his comrades die that their horses cannot move without wading through Christian blood.

Another battle follows later in the story in which Florent enacts his heterospiritual attraction further, demonstrating for the poem's audiences the disruption caused by desire, for that which is spiritually different, in the ruinous consequences other Christians suffer for Florent's actions. Following the first near-disastrous conflict, more Christian lords come to Paris's aid, including the emperor Octavian (as yet unaware of Florent's true identity). When the Saracens attack again, rather than join the battle, "Florent's thoughts dwelled on the fair maiden, / [and] he did not go to the battle that day," choosing instead to visit Marsebele.<sup>273</sup> Because Florent orients himself in body and action toward an unclean soul and away from his Christian comrades, the poem steps up its critique, and explicitly faults him for the resulting Christian defeat: "And because Florent was not

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<sup>273</sup> Florent thoghte on the feyre maye, / To the batelle wente he not that day," "Octavian," ll. 1633–34.

there / The heathen people were the better; / They vanquished [the Christians in] the battle there.”<sup>274</sup>

To boot, when Florent eventually joins the battle, he is captured.<sup>275</sup> He illustrates a counterpoint to the other protagonists of romance. Whereas they show a respect for the hierarchy of their society and an unwavering adherence to a homospiritual way of being, Florent demonstrates a disregard for spiritual sameness. In direct antithesis, Bevis flees instantly at the mere advances of a Muslim woman; Barnard travels far to see Boulebon worship in her chapel, becomes instantly disgusted when she is accused of adultery, and swoons madly again over her when she is revealed as chaste; and Degrevant practically leaps to “bed” Melidor at the sight of her prayer-chamber. Florent, in counterpoint, falsely represents his king while posing as a messenger, and precipitates the capture of Paris, his own lord, and several other Christian leaders, including his father, the emperor Octavian, all for his desire of spiritual difference. Only the arrival of his long-lost brother, Octavian the younger, saves the day.

Though he features little in the poem, young Octavian, his father’s namesake, resembles much more closely the other, homospiritual knights of romance. Given a “proper” upbringing by his empress mother and the king of Jerusalem, young Octavian exhibits both knightly ethics and prowess. When he hears of his father’s defeat

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<sup>274</sup> And for that Florent was not there / The heythen folke the bettur were; / The batelle thay venquyscht thore. / Or Florent was to the felde comyn, / The Emperoure and the kynge were ynomyn / And the Crysten kynges all that were,” “Octavian,” ll. 1645–50.

<sup>275</sup> “Octavian,” l. 1660.

and capture by the Saracens in Paris, he wishes to rush to the emperor's aid, but restrains himself. Instead of following personal desires as Florent does, young Octavian consults his adoptive lord and requests permission to depart for Paris.<sup>276</sup> In a broad sense, he demonstrates full fealty to those spiritually same around him, particularly in his duty to reflect on earth the hierarchical relationship between heavenly lord and mortal subject. He shows respect and deference toward the king of Jerusalem, whereas his brother misrepresents the French king and brings on a bloody conflict. Where Florent's heterospiritual desire represents a spiritual failure, realized through his actions in disastrous consequences for his Christian community, Octavian follows his society's ethical codes with restorative results: soon after his arrival, "The Christian men stood better — / The heathens were brought to ground."<sup>277</sup> Young Octavian and his men defeat the Saracens and free the captive Christians. Marsebele is baptized and the liberated Florent weds her.

Unlike other household romances, however, the protagonist's marriage does not mark the story's conclusion. Instead, Florent and Marsebele fall childless into the background, and the narrative's ending celebrates the reunification of Octavian the elder with his wife and sons. Notably, this reunification is engineered not by Florent but by his brother Octavian. The tale is in a sense a double-romance, one part of the tale celebratory, the other cautionary. The adventure of Octavian the younger follows the celebratory

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<sup>276</sup> "Octavian," l. 1684–86.

<sup>277</sup> The Crysten men the bettur stode — / The hethyn were broght to grownde," "Octavian," ll. 1733–34).

resolution of typical tales: he is a young and puissant knight who obeys chivalric ethics, reflects the Kingdom of Heaven on earth through his fealty, and in return increases his social rank from king's charge to emperor's heir.

The conclusion to Florent's episode provides a cautionary counterpoint. As Stephen Knight suggests, "*Octavian's* turbulent path to reunion [leaves] strain and disturbance on the mind [of the audience]."<sup>278</sup> Although Florent eventually weds his lover, Marsebele, *he* does not win her. Instead, his brother Octavian defeats her father and opens the path for the union. Doubtfully lost on the Thornton Manuscript's audiences — especially in light of the positively homospiritual narratives in *Degrevant* and *Erle of Tolous* elsewhere in their manuscript — even the imperfect, happy ending for Florent is through little method of his own. Though Marsebele is converted in a throwaway line, and thus their union is ultimately, superficially at least homospiritual in her newfound Christian sameness with Florent, his heterospiritual method of being was not only nonresponsible for this spiritual success, but counterproductive thereto. Had Octavian the younger himself deviated from his duty to family and Christendom at large, Florent would have remained prisoner, and Marsabele Muslim. In a sort of metatextual moment, the narrative arrival of Octavian itself straightens the deviant desire of the ill-oriented protagonist, and only then thereby providing a straightening narrative.

In contrast to the overtly voluntary conversion of Josian in *Bevis*, Marsabele's baptism is passive: "That fair maiden Marsabele / the truth is, was afterward sent / To

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<sup>278</sup> Knight, "Social Function," 115.



Paris near where she was. / She was christened on a Sunday.”<sup>279</sup> Where Josian, though initially unconcerned with a heterospiritual relationality to Bevis, later comes to enthusiastically wash herself clean in order to share a sameness of Christianity with her lover, Marsebele is portrayed as being “sent” to her christening. After over a thousand lines of willingly heterospiritual activities between she and Florent, with consistently disapproved negative consequences, this deviance from an orientation, a mode of desiring and seeking, sameness, is straightened by an external force, the eponymous hero Octavian.

That Florent’s *desire* for spiritual difference matters more than *result* in the ethic of the poem receives affirmation in the protagonist’s ultimate fate. While his conclusion has the semblance of the “happily ever after” endings in other romances — marriage to a clean, in this case *cleansed*, Christian maiden — unlike his counterparts, Florent receives neither household nor heir. Moreover, the story moves the heirless Florent offstage before concluding with young Octavian’s triumphant reunification of his family. And unlike Degrevant or Barnard, who both inherit lands and associated titles from their new wives, Florent receives no such estate, neither implied nor manifest, from his marriage to Marsebele. His inherited lineage is one defeated, landless, and non-Christian. Rather, Florent’s brother, young Octavian, brings about the reunion of their biological parents. Through this reconciliation, he reconstructs his own lineage and positions himself for the imperial throne behind his namesake father. By reuniting his parents with each other and

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<sup>279</sup> Marsabele that faire maye / Was after sent, the sothe to saye, / To Paresche righte thore scho was. / Cristenede scho was on a Sonondaye,” “Octavian,” ll. 1807–10.

himself to his father, young Octavian, in a sense, begets his own lineage. A tale that began with the plight of an heirless emperor concludes with the problem solved: the reunification of family represents the arrival of the heir sought as resolution to the narrative.

He is, in literal and figurative senses, the second coming of the ruler risen. Thought dead and lost, Octavian the younger returns, literally, as the second of his name. Figuratively — more accurately numerologically — the number eight inherent in his name took on biblical meaning for medieval Christian commentators who, “believing that Pythagoras learned his number lore from Moses, readily adopted pagan numerology for their own purposes. Eight signified for them the beginning of a new progression after an end of the old”<sup>280</sup> And while commentators were not the audience of the Thornton Manuscript and its romances, the preponderance of religious texts in the manuscript and the family’s ties to Rievaulx seem to suggest some awareness of such concepts as this, which play out even in texts as commonplace as Genesis. Octavian in his very name signifies a new beginning after the completion of the biblical number seven. This is born out not only in that he is the second coming of his name in the narrative, but in his earthly salvation of all of Christendom as portrayed in the poem. Octavian, in this sense, figures the second coming of Christ for the tale’s audience, another knight *imitatio Christi*, like Degrevant. In his freeing of Florent, and the subsequent correction of the romance to one of spiritual sameness, Octavian represents a causal connection between Christian

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<sup>280</sup> Russell A. Peck, “Number Structure in St. Erkenwald.” *Annuaire Mediaevale*. V. 24, 1973. Pp. 9–21 (12).

salvation and correction to the homospiritual method of knowing and being that he practices, in contrast to his brother.

Florent, despite all this, is a husband adrift. He is a pale reflection of his brother: though married, he is a knight defeated, and a man with neither household nor heir. The exploits of these two brothers converge to create a narrative at once exemplary, as other romances, and cautionary, illustrating the uncomfortable results of a deviant desire for difference — no matter the eventual outcome. In this sense, *Octavian* conforms to a similar horizon of expectations as the other homospiritually interested texts I discuss in this study because, though primarily a cautionary tale rather than an exemplary one, it validates the same sequence of events: Florent does not desire in the same way as protagonists in the other texts, and accordingly does not attain the same goals. Where the poem's audiences do not witness Florent seeking spiritual sameness, they would not expect, and indeed would not find, Florent to acquire social advancement and the ability to generate a family. The message is ultimately perhaps more conservative even than the ardent advice Jacques de Vitry preached. Not only does the eventual cleanliness of one's spiritual household matter, and proximity to difference along the way a danger to this end, but even achieved, intimacy with a sameness of spiritual purity may not be enough, if the method of desire along the way, one's orientation, was not itself along straight lines toward sameness.

The two romances ultimately offer a sort of diptych. Where *Degrevant* proffers a paragon of homospiritual desire whose life proceeds toward idealized rewards, *Octavian*

provides episode after episode of the perils, personal and public, resultant of heterospiritual deviance. If the letter-writing knight Degrevant bears some semblance to the romantically epistolary Alfred Kralik, then Florent is perhaps an occupant of the free-wheeling, carnally-driven Pottersville dream vision in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Only after the duty-bound, spiritually-satisfied Octavian — the George Bailey of the romance — returns, is the harmony and homospirituality of this medieval Bedford Falls set back on a straightened path. And like James Stewart, the dutiful, same-soul-seeking knight stars again and again in the popular romances of late medieval England. *Bevis of Hampton* and *Erle of Tolous*, *Sir Degrevant* and *Octavian* are just blockbuster examples.<sup>281</sup> Numerous other romances surviving from the period bear similar if subtler models of erotic and even sexual orientation toward spiritual sameness, from *Sir Tryamour* to *Le Bone Florence of Rome* to *Sir Cleges*. How instructive they and texts like Jacques de Vitry's, Christina of Stommeln's, and Aelred's can be, is up to our reception of their epistemologies alongside our own struggles to understand ourselves, and our respect for what distinguishes their desires, historically, from ours yet to come.

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<sup>281</sup> Perhaps if Frank Capra had known *Octavian*, he would have been able to foresee the low, initial draw a cautionary tail might have for audiences seeking spiritual satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 7:

### GHOSTS OF QUEERNESS YET TO COME

In LGBTQ communities, the last letter, Q, often holds dual-meaning, standing not only for Queer, but for Questioning. This latter “Q” has always born very particular, very soul-searching, and very time-transcending meaning. Even for those of us comfortable and fully out to ourselves, an earlier period of life involved first questioning a straightness passed down to us, imposed on us, or otherwise inhabited. For others, questioning our gender and erotic orientation can be a lifelong process — even stably so, in a way, with a self-acceptance and comfort in the ways desire and gender identity can shift from day to day, moment to moment.

But on the 2017 political and legislative stage in the United States, our existential relationship with *questioning* has another gravity, under President Trump’s administration of federal government, from a questioning of hopeful potentialities to a questioning of concern: what does the future hold for popular and legal conceptions of queerness? What does the present hold? When I began this study, our communities were largely laden with hopeful potentialities for a verdant future. Rapid civil progressions in rights for many made room for vigorous discussion of differences of identity and ideology within our own communities. As I close this study, civil rights are being rescinded, and we might ask ourselves, how do we achieve true dialogue with the straight, even queerphobic world,

and is survival as a broad group compatible with difference among each other? Of innumerable anti-LGBTQ measures taken by the United States' federal government since January 2017, ranging from the revocation of protections for trans youth's access to bathrooms in schools to the appointment of numerous publicly queerphobic officials, one move in particular seems to stand out vis à vis this study.<sup>282</sup> While the federal census for 2020 had been slated to include demographic tracking of residents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, these have since been removed from the draft of the 2020 census, and their inclusion described as an "error."<sup>283</sup> And while these four identifiers are certainly a far cry from the epistemological recognition of OK Cupid's numerous identity categories of orientation and gender, they would have represented a substantial gain in our legal existence as a broad community. For the first time, we were to be counted, literally, among other demographics of U.S. residents.

And so even as new names for orientation and desire proliferate among LGBTQ folx (as those mentioned in the introduction to this study, e.g.: asexual, demisexual, sapiosexual, pansexual, queer, and yes, questioning), the potentiality of expanded "official" existence evaporates. Conversations thus seem all the more fraught about whether terms such as "queer" are importantly inclusive, or politically impotent. The late

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<sup>282</sup> Mary Emily O'Hara, "First 100 Days: How President Trump Has Impacted LGBTQ Rights," NBC News, 26 April, 2017. <<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/first-100-days-how-president-trump-has-impacted-lgbtq-rights-n750191>>, accessed 7 October, 2017.

<sup>283</sup> Mary Emily O'Hara, "LGBTQ Americans Won't Be Counted in 2020 U.S. Census After All," NBC News, 29 March, 2017 <<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/lgbtq-americans-won-t-be-counted-2020-u-s-census-n739911>>. Accessed 7 October, 2017.

José Esteban Muñoz, for one, saw his work, *Cruising Utopia*, as a “polemic that argues against anti-relationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity.”<sup>284</sup> Where queerness *is* the all-inclusive term, theory, and mode of being, we might consider how it could bear resemblance to Christianity, with parallel benefits and pitfalls of inclusivity, for an in-group, and eraser of individuality.

Judith Butler, for another, remarked in 2013 — worth quoting at length — that

the emergence of a queer politics was meant to confirm the importance of battling homophobia no matter what your identity was. But it was also a signal of the importance of alliance; an attunement to minoritization in its various forms; a struggle against precarious conditions, regardless of ‘identity’; and a battle against racism and social exclusion.

Of course, there is also a now-entrenched tension between identity-based and alliance-based sexual minority politics, and my affiliation with ‘queer’ is meant to affirm the politics of alliance across difference. Broadly put, a strong alliance on the left requires, minimally a commitment to combating both racism and homophobia, combating both anti-immigrant politics and various forms of misogyny and induced

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<sup>284</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

poverty.... So let us consider more carefully, then, how the politics of speech enters into this situation...<sup>285</sup>

Just as Butler speaks here of “queer” as a marker of inclusivity and alliance with other (and often intersecting!) minority identities, it at once stands for inclusivity and alliance across difference within the LGBTQ community. As a colleague of mine asserted this summer at a meeting of white, anti-racist educators, he identifies as a gay man, but also as a queer man, because his community and his commitment to LGBTQ rights extends beyond his gay identity. His taking on of a specifically queer identifier, regardless of his simultaneous status as a gay man, establishes a sense of self at once inclusive and in alliance with those of us who are more on the margins, even within the marginal LGBTQ community: those pansexual or asexual, genderqueer or genderfluid, etc. et al. Our “politics of speech” then, as Butler asserts, matters on a number of levels. It matters in how we build alliance with other minorities who are not (also) queer, it matters in how we identify and explore the contours within our own queer communities — and it matters in how we build alliance with those outside our communities — even, perhaps, with those who are queerphobic.

It is particularly for these latter two purposes — exploring the horizons of queerness, and building alliance with those outside of the queer community — that I find the utility of this study. In ways that are more explicit, I think, contemplating the

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<sup>285</sup> Judith Butler, “The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood” in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 122.



complexities of erotic orientation in the Middle Ages offers us alternate models of being and desire beyond those selective ones set out for us by nineteenth-century taxonomy. Contemporary queer folk for some time now have been, for instance, considering separations of sexual orientation from romantic orientation — thinking of oneself as asexual, but still homoromantic, for instance, or demisexual (desiring first emotionally and only then sexually). Contemplating how at least certain medieval people consciously oriented their desires toward objects other than sexed bodies, then, both validates these recent moves per se, and offers other lines along which we might explore our own desires and identities: lines of drawing ourselves that may be at once old, in parallel with medieval modes, and new, yet to come in our time.

But I also believe that regarding an erotics that is deeply and genuinely based in spiritual affinity and Christian understandings of purity offers an opportunity to use history to contemplate contemporary commonality among our own queer communities and with those religious ones that have historically and presently feared us. Examining medieval Christian beliefs in light of contemporary queer theory suggests a parallel of their orientations then, and ours now.

This parallel is summed up well, I think, in the Christian bible's book of Galatians — epigraph to the second chapter of this study — when it argues that, “For whoever of you has been baptized in the manner of Christ has clothed themselves in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free-born, *neither male nor female. In fact, you*

*are all one* in Jesus Christ.”<sup>286</sup> Now, I doubt any of us would go so far as to say that there is neither gay nor lesbian, neither cis nor trans, neither male nor female — but I think many of us — such as Butler — certainly might go so far as to say that *we are all one in Queerness*. As Butler addresses, this is a belief that is important to us philosophically but also politically.

I would like to suggest here that this includes, importantly, not only alliance across difference between differing minoritized groups and within them, but alliances with those institutions that have queerphobic and oppressive impact upon us. At present, in 2017, among those anti-LGBTQ activists in the federal government are those like Mike Pence, whose queerphobia is explicitly driven by his Christian beliefs. If we are to have any hope of a truly inclusive, free world with regard to our being, we *do* want alliance across difference, even with such people, do we not? We want to share that queerness with them. We don’t want them to be homophobic, transphobic, or (lest we forget the other political imperatives of queerness Butler marks for us) racist, sexist, classist, ableist, ageist, antisemitic, Islamophobic or, really, any manner of eraser or discrimination. Building those alliances requires dialogue, which requires common ground. It requires that we find the similar ways in which we move, think, act, and *be* — even if they are not inclined to find them. And this common ground I believe exists.

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<sup>286</sup> “quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis. non est Iudaeus neque Graecus non est servus neque liber non est masculus neque femina omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu.” The Latin “Vulgate” Bible, emphasis mine.

It seems inherent in how both Christianity, medieval and modern, and at least some of us in queer communities, conceive of the potentiality that inspires us toward a future that lies along lines with the present. I am thinking particularly here of that queer utopia discussed by José Esteban Muñoz, and the importance of potentiality to its definition. More than possibility, he says, “potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is [im]minent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense.”<sup>287</sup> As it was for Aelred’s consideration of the utility of *potential* sexual desire, for Muñoz, potentiality is the shadow in the present of what *might be* in the future — or even shadows. To take our current reality and its potentialities, considering that recension of civil rights and census counts for queer folx today creates the potentiality that we may move forward through present tenses into darker futures, as law today both codifies and reflexes into culture, closing off certain potentialities from the future becoming realities. At best, these potentialities are deferred, setting their realization even further a’future still. To take recent history as another example, for many of us, while the legality of same-sex marriage was a pressing, deeply desired, civic *right*, it was also a not-quite-utopia. For,

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

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<sup>287</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the 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*.<sup>288</sup>

So, when we achieved the victory of same-sex marriage for instance, we moved forward in time from one present to the next, we followed a course toward queerness, a queer utopia, and yet that “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” moves forward as well — or perhaps more accurately, it remains at the same, non-temporal distance, out of reach, no matter how much closer we think we get. We must give up a certain *jouissance* of longing for a queer, utopian potentiality at a certain distance, as we arrive at a not-quite-utopia that is yet another “prison house.” Critical civil rights are granted through access to legal marriage, yet problematic modes of social being long associated with marriage risk further ossification. And so we continue to reach, for a then and there that is not quite here and now.

And it is here at which I think we can identify a deeper connection, an intercourse if you will, between queerness and that theology that we typically identify — rightly so — as such a source of queerphobia. And from that connection we can, on the one hand,

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid. 1.

find a common ground on which, perhaps, eventually, in some potentiality, to build alliance across difference — and, on the other hand, learn a thing or two from medieval Christians about how to be queer.

As Muñoz describes, queerness — queer utopia — is something for which we must always strive, but which we may never touch. It exists outside of straight time. He advocates that “we might think of a stepping out of time and place, leaving the here and now of straight time for a then and a there that might be queer futurity,” that is, a potentiality of the future, outside of time (and I recognize here that a future *outside of time* is itself logically consistent within time, existing only for us after the passage of present time into the future, and illogical, for outside of time there is of course no future).<sup>289</sup> And, importantly, since “straight” is as relational a concept as queer — one superordinate and one subordinate in ways that will always be relative to one another — the dominant, imposed temporality, whether heteronormative, homonormative, or otherwise, will always be straight. In this absoluteness, we may say that queerness exists outside not only straight time, but time, period. That is, it also exists outside of space. Queerness in this way, being outside of time that is always already straight, is not corporeal, and can never be — though through enacting queerness with our bodies, and souls, we long and strive for it. If we are Muñozian, anyway, we orient ourselves toward this queerness, and so are oriented toward something that exists outside of time.

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 185.

Medieval Christian and contemporary “straight” theology takes god and heaven as that which exists outside of time. To be completely without sin, clean and ready for communion with god, in heaven, is something that the human caste out of Eden cannot attain, ever, on earth. It is something for which — precisely as Muñoz advocates for queerness — one should strive, reach for, idealize, knowing that it can never be attained in this life. It is something that exists only outside of space and time, where god resides, in heaven. The good Christian attempts to be as virtuous as possible, but knows that original sin prevents perfect virtue. Acts such as baptism and confession are cleansing acts, and offer signs of god’s utopian grace but, just as Muñoz describes of queerness, it is something we may never touch, “but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” Like Muñozian queerness, the Christian god’s grace can be felt, received, in heaven. It is outside of time, never attainable in this life, and yet it is a course along which the good Christian, including the queerphobic one, orients their desire — just as we, following Muñoz, orient ourselves along a course to a queer utopia outside of time.

Indeed, if we swap “queerness” for “Christianity” or “heaven,” Muñoz’s elaboration above of queer potentiality starts to sound an awful lot like a description of God’s grace — something imminent, performed toward, but “not actually existing in the present.”

Heaven is not yet here. Christianity is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet Christian. We may never touch heaven, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been Christian, yet Christianity exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future. The future is heaven's domain. Christianity 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 totaling rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*.<sup>290</sup>

With minor substitution, one might start to wonder, are we reading contemporary queer theory, or medieval Christian theology? Further still, a similar swap in Muñoz's conclusion to *Cruising Utopia* lends his contemporary, secular queer voice an informative resemblance, perhaps, to a medieval queer Christian like Aelred — or even a “straight” one like Bernard of Clairvaux. As Muñoz says, “Take ecstasy with me thus becomes a request to stand out of time together, to resist the stultifying temporality and time that is not ours, that is saturated with violence both visceral and emotional, a time that is not [Christian]. [Christianity's] time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is [Christ's] way.”<sup>291</sup> In

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid. 9, recast.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 187.

navigating the conflicts and commonalities among these communities, we may find that a medieval “then and there” is both a past and a future for communities queerphobically Christian, and queer themselves.<sup>292</sup>

We might have then, common mode of being, if not common cause, with even queerphobic Christians, for whom union with god, in heaven, is the ultimate goal. More than mere intersectional points, and more than even an assemblage of such points constituting a line in space and time that describes our movement, we share a mutual, *intentional* course that *prescribes* our modes of being. The queerphobic Christian’s heaven is certainly a different terminus than our queer utopia, but in the era of instant-gratification, material satisfaction, and neoliberalism, Muñozians and queerphobic Christians make queer bedfellows.

We seek something outside of time. They are certainly disparate potentialities, but our mode of being, our mode of desiring a then and there, is not an insubstantial common ground. It is deep, and penetrating: both rare temporalities that are, in fact, extratemporal. It is a common course that we should consider using to build true dialogue. Where secular queer discourse that rejects collectivity and futurity — and this I would argue remains a popular discourse in certain queer communities — operates with a totally different epistemology from that of Christian queerphobia, a queer discourse based in our own utopia shares, at the very least, the common mode of an extratemporal orientation.

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<sup>292</sup> These are, of course, not mutually exclusive, either. Ibid., 1.



Such common course is already being navigated by groups like the Metropolitan Community Church, where there are further enjoyments of this parallelism already being taken by contemporary Christian queer theologians for whom, to take Elizabeth Stuart as example, the ultimate queerness is located beyond the eschatological veil, after death, and realized in the body of Christ.<sup>293</sup> Such practitioners of queer liberation theology have long informed their faith and practice with academic queer theory. Christ is the ultimate queer: trans in simultaneous divinity and humanity, genderqueer in masculine authority and feminine nurturing.<sup>294</sup> These theologians' enjoyment, on the one hand, of a common Christian course with fundamentalist communities and, on the other hand, with academic queer theory, is a bridge more of us would do well to cross, I think, if indeed we follow the political imperatives of Queer: to reach across difference in order to eliminate suffering.

But in the absence of "Saint" Muñoz, we may also use this common course to reach back, to think to a queer futurity with medieval saints. The ebb of DOMA, the flow of access to same-sex marriage, and the tidal pools surrounding our current political quagmire remind us that the "totalizing rendering of reality" against which Muñoz asserted we must strive is itself a little bit queer in time, a "here and now" that has already become a past "then and there." So, what now? If, perpetually, "queerness is not

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<sup>293</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh," in *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 65–66.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, for example. See also Patrick S. Cheng, *Queer Love: an Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011) and *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007).

yet here,” then how, post-DOMA, post-Obama, might queer communities “think and feel a then and there”? The passing of a pre-DOMA epoch into history suggests that we may look to medieval “field[s] of possibility,” ostensibly straight, in imagining futurity.

The writings of homospiritual medievals, such as Aelred of Rievaulx, Jacques de Vitry, or Christina of Stommeln, instruct in ways to imagine a futurity that begins in queer embodiment and bodily love — and yet exists both within and surrounding straight modes of being — a queer intercourse of straightness and deviance. And the presence of this homospiritual erotic desire in popular, ostensibly heterosexed tales like *Erle of Tolous*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *Sir Degrevant*, and *Octavian* demonstrate that homospiritual desire and orientation were popular ideals as well, at the very least in communities surrounding Ashmole 61, Cambridge Ff.2.28, and the Thornton Manuscript in Leicestershire and Yorkshire, respectively. As we navigate what it means to think and live queerly post-DOMA, the temporal margins of a *then and there* yet to come may lie latent in a queerness already past. I propose the writing of Aelred, for one, is a rich repository of guides in extratemporal, utopian striving, and I would like to end more by *Questioning* than concluding, as seems fitting a study in queer pasts and potentialities.

Let me ask — because while I have discussed this much with many, I believe the answer remains unset — when is queer desire truly queer? When is it just an expression of pleasure with, or for, same or various or deviant bodies, and when is it a longing to *be* or even *become* queer — in form and in act — to embody and enact that queer potentiality, to long with our bodies for that not-quite-there-ness? If the victories of civil

rights risk homonormativity — a sort of straightness that does not revolve around heterosexuality — how do we get it back?

If we were not mourning Muñoz, he might have an answer, or does — but in his absence we might look to Aelred’s discussion of friendship, and take up his imperative to “make it serve [our] own progress.”<sup>295</sup> Beyond his discussions of deviant forms of desire, of homospiritualities with which we might reflect upon our own futurity of identity, he directs attention to the compatibility of temporal living, and that in heaven — that is, this place outside of time analogues to that extratemporal queer utopia for which we strive. Let us ask this ghost of queerness yet to come, How can we regain that queer pleasure if it need be longed for a little bit less, and yet is no more close? How can access to same-sex marriage, for instance, be *both* a critical civil right whose acquisition is worthy of celebration *and* incompatible with radical rejection of marriage as a longstanding agent of things like reproductive normativity, gendered inequality, economic disparity, etc.? Medieval manuscripts like Aelred’s offer this: that “if perhaps such bliss is hard to discover for all in this life, because it is reserved for us in the future [that is, out of time,] nevertheless the more such happy souls abound among us here, the more we realize—do we not?—that souls are happier there than we are here.”<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Aelred, *De spiritali amicitia*, 3.127.

<sup>296</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 108. Cf. Aelredus Rievallensis, *Opera Omnia I*, CCCM 1, ed. A Hoste, C. H. Talbot, R. Vander Plaeste (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), 3.82: “Quod si forte de omnibus difficile inuentu sit in praesenti, cum id nobis in futurum seruetur, quanto plures nobis abundant huiusmodi, tanto nobis feliciores aestimabimus?”

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