



Tom Linkinen, *Same-sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* (Crossing Boundaries: Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies), Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam 2015. 334 pp.

'Let diverse people say diversely, both then and now' (p. 309). Ending his study with this Chaucer-inspired dictum, Tom Linkinen concludes by emphasizing the plurality of responses to what he calls 'same-sex sexuality' in later medieval England. This 'manifoldness' (p.8) is communicated in the preceding pages through a patchwork of different sources: references to unnatural or sodomitic practices in theological treatises, penitentials and an anchoritic rulebook; imagery of sodomites being tormented in afterlife visions; records in chronicles of sexual insults traded between religious enemies, or applied to kings and courtiers; and poetic allusions to homoeroticism, same-sex love and friendship in works by Chaucer and his contemporaries. While acknowledging the relative silence of English law pertaining to same-sex sexual activity in the period, Linkinen also probes relevant legal material, notably the celebrated testimony of John/Eleanor Rykener. This predominantly textual corpus is supplemented by a handful of pictorial sources including misericords, funerary monuments and — as reproduced on the book's cover — a scene of infernal punishment for sodomy on Lincoln cathedral's west front.

Linkinen interprets his sources with reference to six paradigms or 'framings' that, he submits, assumed particular significance in later medieval English culture. The first three chapters range across a largely familiar terrain. Chapter one introduces perhaps the most notorious medieval framework for comprehending same-sex sexuality, namely notions of sodomy and the 'sin against nature.' The second chapter turns to silence and silencing, another well-known paradigm as embodied in the phrase 'the unmentionable vice.' Here the author claims, somewhat counterintuitively, not to 'find the question of silence itself too fruitful' (p. 90). We then learn, however, that his interest lies as much in the silences of 'later scholarly discussions' as it does in medieval primary sources (p. 90). In chapter three,

Linkinen explores how imagery of same-sex sexual desire was evoked as a means of stigmatizing political or religious enemies.

The second half of the book includes discussion of frames that have tended to command less attention in scholarship to date. Chapter four explores the affective dimensions to the defaming rhetoric outlined previously, discovering, in references to the sin against nature and its cognates, a climate of disgust and fear. Particularly compelling is Linkinen's analysis of imagery of filth, which implicitly contributed to forging connections between male same-sex desire and anal sex. The fifth chapter briefly surveys deployments of laughter in visual and verbal sources as a means of confronting same-sex sexuality, before honing in on Chaucer's much-debated account of the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*. Finally, in chapter six, Linkinen considers the obverse to the mainly negative picture painted previously. Almost all the texts and images he discusses are marked by condemnatory attitudes; but taking stock of an argument previously advanced by Michel Foucault, the author also speculates on a world of 'non-condemnatory possibilities' (p. 233) in reality.

This last chapter is heavily reliant on Alan Bray's pioneering work on premodern friendship, though Bray's analyses are occasionally supplemented with additional insights. In a lively analysis of a memorial brass marking the grave of two men joined in spiritual friendship in the chapel of Merton College, Oxford, for instance, we learn that John Bloxham, one of the men depicted on the brass, is reported in a chronicle as having been accused in Parliament by two of his Merton colleagues of 'bad, unnameable crimes' (quoted on p. 266). Conceivably the accusation brings into play a sodomitical frame of reference, but Linkinen sensibly refrains from resolving this fragmentary evidence, such as it is, into a clear statement of fact. He aims to recover 'actual lives' (p. 233), but not at the expense of keeping alternative 'frames of possibilities' (p.299) in view.

Symptomatic of this approach is the author's deliberate avoidance of the term 'homosexuality,' as well as related terms such as 'lesbianism' and 'bisexuality,' which he perceives as being 'fundamentally situated in the framework of modern, rather than medieval culture' (p. 17). Linkinen prefers to speak instead of 'same-sex sexuality,' which encompasses a spectrum of attitudes ranging from the condemnatory to the celebratory; the 'same-sex' formulation has the capacity to convey what, to his mind, is a more 'cross-cultural and cross-historical' understanding (p. 18), derived from what 'the later medieval English themselves [...] wrote and read (pp. 10–11)'.

I agree that concepts of a distinct homosexual identity sometimes apply uneasily to medieval sources. Labels such as 'sodomite,' after all, would rarely if ever have become a badge of self-identification or pride. But

'same-sex sexuality' potentially has its own limitations as an interpretive prism. As Linkinen acknowledges on more than one occasion, condemnations of sodomy often focused especially on its violation of gender boundaries. Or, in the words of the twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille, whose *Plaint of Nature* is analysed across several pages, unnatural sex 'changes "hes" into "shes"' (quoted at p. 66). The assumption that what is principally at issue in medieval anti-sodomy polemic is 'same-sex' eroticism arguably meets a challenge in these contexts.

Elsewhere, in collaboration with Ruth Karras, Linkinen has recently explored the applicability of 'transgender' and related vocabulary to medieval experience, specifically with reference to an imaginative retelling of the Rykener case.¹ The book presently under review might also have benefited from the adoption of such playful and knowingly anachronistic strategies. As it stands, the replacement of a putatively modern concept ('homosexuality') with an ostensibly more neutral-sounding alternative ('same-sex sexuality') risks simply performing a terminological sleight of hand, whereby the basic assumption — that the principal target of the condemnatory rhetoric is a homoerotic sex act, rather than, say, an inversion of gender roles — remains unchallenged. Generally speaking, Linkinen resists the temptation to extract a unitary message from his materials. But the author's framing of his sources as consistently being concerned with 'same-sex sexuality' arguably detracts from the vision of multiplicity he ultimately strives to foreground.

One of the most praiseworthy features of this book is its attention to sources pertaining to women as well as men. Admittedly references to female homoeroticism turn up less frequently in the record than those relating to the male equivalent, shrouded as they are in a pervasive veil of silence (p. 88). Rejecting the assumption that absence of evidence necessarily constitutes evidence of absence, however, Linkinen remains attuned to those moments where sexual relations between women do seem to have attracted the attention of late medieval commentators.

Also laudable is Linkinen's effort to collate a 'greater variety of sources' (p. 26), and perhaps the book's most distinctive contribution to existing scholarship is its aspiration to comprehensiveness. In a survey of late medieval discourses of sodomy, for instance, Linkinen incorporates passing references to evocations of the biblical Sodom story in texts as diverse as John Lydgate's *Testament* and William Caxton's *Game and Playe of the Chesse*, both of which (as far as I'm aware) haven't previously been included in treatments of this topic.

¹ Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, 'John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited,' in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E.J. Burns*, ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, D. S. Brewer: Cambridge 2016, pp. 111–121.

Inevitably there will be a time lag between the completion of a book manuscript and its appearance in print, but it's worth noting that only a handful of items listed in Linkinen's bibliography postdate 2009. Additionally, while one could be forgiven for failing to master the burgeoning bibliography on medieval sexualities, Linkinen doesn't cite a number of key monographs published in the preceding decade. Several of these studies discuss English material, albeit sometimes with reference to earlier centuries or a different textual milieu.² The engagement with relevant continental sources is also somewhat patchy and no convincing case is advanced here for investigating the English situation in relative isolation. Significantly, while the author has researched a number of key texts in Latin, his perspective on 'later medieval English culture' doesn't usually extend to the French of England.

The book would undoubtedly have benefited from more and better editing. The text contains a sizeable number of grammatical and expressive lapses, most of which should have been ironed out at the copyediting stage. Quotations from primary and secondary sources sometimes contain garbled spellings or mistranscriptions.³ Some of the lengthier syntheses of existing scholarship (notably on Chaucer's Pardoner and Edward II's relationship with Piers Gaveston) could probably have been pruned without significantly detracting from the larger argument. Better-quality photographs might have been sourced for some of the illustrations.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the book deserves credit for bringing to its subject a new level of depth and detail. Linkinen demonstrates the benefit of opening analysis up to a wider variety of sources and performs a valuable service by gathering those materials together within the pages of a single volume.

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² These include William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004; David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009; Matt Cook, with Robert Mills, Randolph Trumbach and H.G. Cocks, *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, Greenwood: Oxford 2007; C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 1999; Derek Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England*, Chicago University Press: Chicago 2008; and Robert Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2000.

³ On p. 195, for instance, an article of mine is misquoted ('comprehensible' has become 'comprehensive'). A quotation on the same page from the *Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* includes two spelling errors: 'remenbryd' for 'remembryd'; 'condemphnyth' for 'condempnyth.'