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**Premodern Pedagogies: Queer Medieval Materiality**

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In this paper, I address some of the challenges facing medieval queer history in the classroom, in academic scholarship, and in public-facing work. My intentions are to dynamically integrate some common pedagogical questions with supporting literature to explore them, and argue that any comprehensive study of premodern men, women, and gender must take queer history into account. The subject may feel intimidating, but I encourage all historians to familiarize themselves with the material, gain confidence in teaching it, and integrate it even outside of dedicated courses on the history of gender and sexuality. The below is offered as a brief methodological primer, intended to facilitate conversation, and by no means an exhaustive review of a swiftly growing discipline. For the purposes of this piece, “queer history” is understood as roughly akin to but not identical with “LGBTQ history,” as established post-Stonewall and the emergence of the modern gay rights movement.

The word “queer” is useful as a wide-ranging signifier precisely because of its lack of formal boundaries. We often have a sense of what is “queer” only in comparison to what is usual, acceptable, or normative, and the word contains a distinct connotation of violating these standards in any manner perceived as outside the mainstream.¹ But we must specify whose mainstream that is. Practices that may seem, to us, unambiguously charged with same-sex desire, clearly worthy of being signified “queer,” might not have been at all unusual to medieval peers.² We must not assume that modern gendered norms are a timeless standard, or erase the nuances, complexities, and contradictions of human identity, behavior, and desire for centuries.

This piece, therefore, focuses on strategies for responding to: 1) ignorance, 2) belief in a “conspiracy of historians,” and 3) minimalization or compartmentalization. To the first: the widespread

¹ See Burgwinkle, “État Présent: Queer Theory and the Middle Ages”; Hollywood, “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages”; Klosowska, Queer Love in the Middle Ages; and Mills, “Queer is Here.”

² Zeikowitz, Homoeroticism and Chivalry. See also Ailes, “The Medieval Male Couple.”
popular idea of the Middle Ages does not seem to allow an existential framework for queer individuals, behavior, or community. Students often assume that there were no queer people in the medieval world, or that they hid or repressed their desires, or that they were persecuted by the supposedly omnipotent and intolerant Catholic church. Cases such as John/Eleanor Rykener, the fourteenth-century genderfluid London sex worker, are useful for introducing individual queer lives as embedded in a particular time and place. While there were certainly medieval ecclesiastics who railed against sodomy, the mere existence of a public discourse against queer behavior was no more equivalent to a self-observed prohibition on it than it is today. It is crucial to emphasize the difference between rhetoric and reality, and the shortcomings of using legal and textual sources to make generalizations about everyday activities and private beliefs.

Separating students from their stereotypes about the medieval church can be arduous. But – just as they do today – queerness and religion existed in both cooperation and conflict in the medieval world. This requires attention to the difficulties of doing social history on subjects who are rarely the recording voices and often transmitted in hostile historiographic frameworks. Thus, a passage that one scholar might read as clearly referent to queerness can become, in the eyes of another, an empty or even accidental signifier.

Such complexities can fuel the second response, which I have termed the “conspiracy of historians.” This belief insists on a

3 Publications on Rykener include Boyd and Karras, “‘Ut cum muliere’”; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Karras and Linkinen, “John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited”; and Goldberg, “John Rykener and Richard II.” The last article, however, has noted flaws; this and the case overall are re-analyzed in a forthcoming book chapter by the present author, “(Re)-Reading John/Eleanor Rykener: The Materiality of Queerness in Late Medieval England.”


queer history that has been systematically destroyed, denied, or covered up by scholars everywhere. Such claims, needless to say, have little in common with the realities of diverse modern-day academics and their investigative projects. Moreover, this rhetoric often comes from those who identify as politically leftist, rather than conservatives who dismiss queerness as a contemporary aberration. When historians challenge the simplistic social media narrative that equates queerness with positive morality, or point out the many difficulties in studying the subject, they are attacked as elitist gatekeepers determined to hide the truth. Dealing with this mindset is not easy, and can be intensely frustrating. This ties into the much larger problem of digital disinformation, and highlights both the urgent need for historical education in the West and disturbing questions as to why it has been so relentlessly devalued.  

The desire for queer history to always have been “real,” to recover a narrative disrupted and damaged by modern homophobia, and to feel as if the community’s long-term survival is far more robust than its enemies would like us to believe, is deeply understandable. Any destabilization of the queer past can ripple uneasily onto the endangered queer present, and this leads to the third category of response, that of minimalization. In cases where queer behaviors, narratives, or references exist in the sources, some analyses interpret it as “merely” rhetoric. However, rhetorical or textual queerness is very much its own category of premodern queer history, and must be taken seriously regardless of whether it can be connected to the physical activities of one material historical body. Dismissing rhetorical queerness, moreover, correlates queerness solely with active sexuality, and reinforces the troubling norm where historical queer relationships are only thought of as valid if they can be proven to have been physically consummated.  

7 Pedagogical manuals on this subject include Wassermann, Teaching in the Age of Disinformation, Journell, ed., Unpacking Fake News, and Bennet and Livingston, eds., The Disinformation Age.  

8 The “merely rhetoric” approach and its shortcomings are critiqued in Burgwinkle, Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature, pp. 73–74.
course, is impossible, and leads us down the path where we end up deliberately refusing the opportunity to conclude anything.

In closing, while popular media (mis)representing the Middle Ages can often be the bane of historians, constructively and creatively engaging with this material is a critical task for the responsible scholar. There are also moments where it is surprisingly useful. For example, the 2020 film *The Old Guard* featured an immortal gay couple, a Muslim and a Christian, who originally met during the crusades. Using it as a teaching tool can open engaging interpretative pathways, especially in the study of a queer history that is not merely white, male, and European, and address the ways in which “Saracens and sodomites” are still used as the “gays and Muslims” stigmatized in modern political discourse. The ongoing reckoning with racism in the academy, and the decolonization of the curriculum, must therefore additionally incorporate premodern queer histories that focus on people and cultures outside the West, including those of Africa, Arabia, and Asia. Since the present and future of LGBTQ people remains unsettled, understanding their past is more critical than ever, and I encourage us all to pursue it with more care, consideration, and compassion.

9 See Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media* and *Remaking the Middle Ages*; Evans and Marchal, eds., *The Uses of the Middle Ages*; and Holsinger, *Neomedievalism*.

10 On teaching *Game of Thrones*-related material, see Larrington, *Winter is Coming*; Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones*; and North, Alvestad and Woodacre, eds, *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers*.


12 For a study of how “Saracens” functioned in the medieval European imagination, see Tolan, *Saracens*. On how the categories of “Saracen” and “sodomite” intersected and informed each other, especially in medieval Iberia, see Hernández Peña, “Reclaiming Alterity.”


14 Recent texts such as Rogers and Roman, eds., *Medieval Futurity*, are vital to continuing this discussion.
Hilary Rhodes received her PhD from the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds in 2019. Her research interests include crusade history, medieval gender, social, and queer history, medieval and modern historiography, and the role of the ‘imagined medieval’ in modern culture. Her first monograph, The Crown and the Cross: Burgundy, France, and the Crusades, 1095-1223 was published in 2020. She currently is an adjunct faculty member at the College of Arts and Sciences, Maryville University, St. Louis.

Bibliography


