



2021

## Premodern Pedagogies: Queer Medieval Materiality

Hilary Rhodes

Maryville University, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rhodes, Hilary (2021) "Premodern Pedagogies: Queer Medieval Materiality," *Quidditas*: Vol. 42 , Article 15. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol42/iss1/15>

This Text and Teaching is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## Premodern Pedagogies: Queer Medieval Materiality

Hilary Rhodes  
Maryville University, St. Louis

*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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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, *Homeropticism 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.”

4 See Elliot, *Corrupter of Boys*, and Boyd, “Disrupting the Norm”; Cottier, “‘Vitium contra naturam’”; Olson, *Of Sodomites*; Russell, “Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus*,” and Scanlon, “Unmanned Men.”

5 See e.g. Benkov, “The Erased Lesbian”; Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy*; Karras, “The Regulation of ‘Sodomy’”; and Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*.

6 See Brooten, *Love Between Women*; Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies”; Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse”; Morris, “*When Brothers Dwell in Unity*,” and Schibanoff, “Hildegard of Bingen and Richildis of Stade.” For queerness and heresy, see Barbezat, “Bodies of Spirit and Bodies of Flesh.”

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> This, of

<sup>7</sup> 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*.

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> There are also moments where it is surprisingly useful.<sup>10</sup> For example, the 2020 film *The Old Guard* featured an immortal gay couple, a Muslim and a Christian, who originally met during the crusades.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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*.

11 Netflix, *The Old Guard*, 2020. See further Francaviglia, “Crusaders and Saracens”; Haydock and Ridsen, eds., *Hollywood in the Holy Land*; Hayes, *Queer Nations*; Kocher, “Gay Knights in Medieval French Fiction”, Murray and Roscoe, eds., *Islamic Homosexualities*; and Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*.

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.”

13 Works focusing on multi-cultural queer histories include Amer, “Medieval Arab Lesbians”; Amer, *Crossing Borders*; Berco, *Sexual Hierarchies*; Blackmore and Hutcheson, eds., *Queer Iberia*; Dasgupta, “Queer Sexuality”; Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*; Hoad, *African Intimacies*; Horswell, *Decolonizing the Sodomite*; Murray and Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*; and Vanita, “Born of Two Vaginas”.

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

- Ailes, Marianne J. "The Medieval Male Couple and the Language of Homosociality." In *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, edited by Dawn M. Hadley, 214–37. Harlow: Longman, 1999.
- Amer, Sahar. "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (2009): 215–36.
- Amer, Sahar. *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Barbezat, Michael D. "Bodies of Spirit and Bodies of Flesh: The Significance of the Sexual Practices Attributed to Heretics From the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 3 (2016): 387–419.
- Benkov, Edith. "The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe." In *Same Sex: Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, edited by Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, 101–22. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston, eds. *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Berco, Cristian. *Sexual Hierarchies, Public Status: Men, Sodomy, and Society in Spain's Golden Age*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.
- Blackmore, Josiah, and Gregory S. Hutcheson, eds. *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Boyd, David L. "Disrupting the Norm: Sodomy, Culture, and the Male Body in Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus*." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994): 63–73.
- Boyd, David L., and Ruth Mazo Karras. "‘Ut cum muliere’: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London." In *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, 99–116. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Brooten, Bernadette. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Burgwinkle, Bill. "État Présent: Queer Theory and the Middle Ages." *French Studies* 60 (2006): 79–88.

- Burgwinkle, Bill. *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Cottier, Jean-François. “Vitium contra naturam”: Sexualité et exclusion dans le *Liber gomorrhianus* de Pierre Damien.” *Cahiers du Centre d’histoire médiévale* 4 (2007): 127–43.
- Dasgupta, Rohit K. “Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India’s Historical Archive.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3 (2011): 651–670.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Elliot, Dyan. *The Corrupter of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- Elliott, Andrew B.R. *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017.
- Elliott, Andrew B.R. *Remaking The Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, Inc. 2010.
- Evans, R.J.W., and Guy P. Marchal, eds. *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Francaviglia, Richard. “Crusaders and Saracens: The Persistence of Orientalism in Historically Themed Motion Pictures about the Middle East.” In *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, edited by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky, 53–90. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007.
- Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.
- Goldberg, Jeremy. “John Rykener, Richard II, and the Governance of London.” *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014): 49–70.
- Habib, Samar. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Haydock, Nickolas, and E.L. Ridsen, eds. *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008.
- Hayes, Jarrod. *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Hernández Peña, E. J. “Reclaiming Alterity: Strangeness and the Queering of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Spain.” *Theology & Sexuality* 22, no. 1-2 (2016): 42–56.
- Hoad, Neville. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Hollywood, Amy. “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 173–79.

- Holsinger, Bruce. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007.
- Horswell, Michael J. *Decolonizing the Sodomite: Queer Tropes of Sexuality in Colonial Andean Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.
- Jordan, Mark D. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Journell, Wayne, ed. *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator's Guide to Navigating the Media with Students*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2019.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. "The Regulation of 'Sodomy' in the Latin East and West." *Speculum* 95 (2020): 969–86.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo, and Tom Linkinen. "John / Eleanor Rykener Revisited." In *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, edited by Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, 111–24. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016.
- Klosowska, Anna. *Queer Love in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Kocher, Suzanne. "Gay Knights in Medieval French Fiction: Constructs of Queerness and Non-Transgression." *Mediaevalia* 29 (2008): 51–66.
- Larrington, Carolyne. *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.
- Lochrie, Karma. "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies." In *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Matter, E. Ann. "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity." In *Weaving the Visions*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, 51–62. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.
- Mills, Robert. 'Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture', *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006), 253–263.
- Morris, Stephen. "When Brothers Dwell in Unity": *Byzantine Christianity and Homosexuality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016.
- Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe, eds., *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe, eds. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, repr. 2021.
- North, Janice, Karl Alvestad and Elena Woodacre, eds. *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex and Power in Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018.
- Olsen, Glenn W. *Of Sodomites, Effeminate, Hermaphrodites, and Androgynes: Sodomy in the Age of Peter Damian*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 2011.



- Payer, Pierre J. *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.
- Rogers, Will, and Christopher Michael Roman, eds. *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the Future of a Queer Medieval Studies*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Russell, Kenneth C. “Peter Damian’s Liber Gomorrhianus: The Text vs. The Scholarly Tradition.” *American Benedictine Review* 49, no. 3 (1998): 299–315.
- Scanlon, Larry. “Unmanned Men and Eunuchs of God: Peter Damian’s Liber Gomorrhianus and the Sexual Politics of Papal Reform.” In *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. 2, edited by Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase, 38–64. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Schibanoff, Susan. “Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade: The Discourse of Desire.” In *Same Sex: Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages*, edited by Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, 49–83. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Tolan, John V. *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- Vanita, Ruth. “Born of Two Vaginas: Love and Reproduction Between Co-Wives in Some Medieval Indian Texts.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11 (2005): 547–77.
- Wassermann, Selma. *Teaching in the Age of Disinformation: Don’t Confuse Me With the Data, My Mind is Made Up!*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Zeikowitz, Richard. *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the 14th Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.