

Female-Sodomy in the Medieval Period

“Against nature, that is, against the order of nature, which created women’s genitals for the use of men, and conversely, and not so women could cohabit with women.”¹

– **Peter Abelard (1079-1142)**

It has been noted by several scholars that Christian authorities within the church have always been concerned with the sexual conduct of its members and perceived sexual transgressions.² Theodore of Tarsus writes as early as the seventh century on sexual relations between women in his penitential, as well as the Venerable Bede. In the next century Pope Gregory III would mention sexual relations between women, too.³ Sodomy can be a murky and ill-defined topic that raises questions among many religious scholars throughout the medieval period, yet it also brings to mind sexual relations between men. It’s true sodomy was frequently attributed to perceived crimes of lust between two men, but there was also a focus on the act of sodomy being the act of anal penetration itself. A woman could be sodomized by a man, therein. Helmet Puff thus coined the term “female sodomy” to fill a hole in the language available at the time to discuss instances of sodomy between women, or *female sodomy*. It’s used for the purpose of referring to Medieval and Renaissance homoeroticism: “often called sodomy from a theological or legal vantage point”⁴. Puff’s introduction of the term also points to relationships between women that affected or otherwise entered the male sphere. Puff’s *female sodomy* is coined to

¹ Brown, Judith C. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1986. Page 7.

² Tideswell, Catherine. “How Far Did Medieval Society Recognize Lesbianism in This Period?” Medievalists.net. February 16, 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Puff, Helmet. “Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477).” Medievalists.net, July 1, 2011. <https://www.medievalists.net/2011/07/female-sodomy-the-trial-of-katherina-hetzeldorfer-1477/>.

“characterize a range of significations beyond the transgression of the sexual order”⁵ and refers to “phenomenon which often escaped categorization in the relevant sources”⁶ to properly “represent women who erotically associated or were associated with their own sex”.⁷ In the medieval period there were accounts in ecclesiastical and lay courts of women charged for their sexual relations with other women, but these accounts are rare in comparison to charges against men. In this paper I will be exploring references to female sodomy within the medieval period, supported by past scholarship in the field of medieval lesbian studies.

Ecclesiastical records are one of historians’ greatest resources for the medieval period. Thanks to the record-keeping practices of the clergy, much of the information regarding cultural ideas and practices surrounding sex, marriage, and gender are found within church documents.

We can see how the church influenced medieval society, but we also do not have an abundance of sources outside ecclesiastical ones on same-sex relations between women. Documented trials and secular legislation can provide insight into research regarding persecuted or marginalized members of society, yet records of arrest or trials for female sodomy are “very rare when compared to the number of trials for male sodomy.”⁸ At the time of Catherine Tideswell’s article on the recognition of lesbianism in medieval society (2014), only twelve cases of female/female sexual relations were found within the entire medieval period.⁹

Up until Judith C. Brown’s *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* book, there were no known prosecutions in Italy by lay or ecclesiastical courts for homosexuality that were between women. Brown’s book introduced me to the topic of female sodomy and the deep,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tideswell, Catherine. “How Far Did Medieval Society Recognize Lesbianism in This Period?”

⁹ Ibid.

interconnected history of the Christian church and Western sexual norms. Brown's research focuses on Sister Benedetta Carlini, an Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God in seventeenth century Italy who had sexual relations with another nun.

Within the realm of human sexuality and gender studies, there is much to analyze about the language we use and how we discuss sexuality historically, without anachronism. Maggie A. Benware in her submission to the Young Historians Conference examining lesbianism in the Middle Ages explains lesbian isn't a "self-explanatory term when applied to the fourteenth century"¹⁰. Lesbianism can be anachronistic to apply to historical sources because it's tied up in complex, contemporary identities. These identities are political, erotic, romantic, artistic, and gender-diverse. Lesbian is an expansive identity and means different things to lesbians now than it meant to lesbians twenty years ago; lesbians in contemporary queer spaces still discourse about who lesbians are, who can be a lesbian, and what lesbian spaces should look like.

Before more precise language and concepts, there's a large array of terms and acts to describe what women "allegedly did" to each other, including: "mutual masturbation, pollution, fornication, sodomy, buggery, mutual corruption, coitus, copulation, mutual vice, the defilement or impurity of women by one another,"¹¹ and the women themselves were most often referred to as "*fricatrices*" or "tribades", referring to the motion of frottage.¹²

Past scholarship uses the "lesbian-like" lens developed by Judith Bennett to identify and discuss sexual attraction between women in the medieval period. "Sexual lesbians" are identified as having acted on their homosexual desires, which includes sex. While the "lesbian-like" is meant to encompass women

¹⁰ Benware, Maggie A., "Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans" (2017). Young Historians Conference.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

“whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same sex love.”¹³ Bennett’s “lesbian-like” is meant to allow historians “to find evidence of female homosexuality outside of those women who took actions based on their attraction”¹⁴ and my ability to draw from this past scholarship for this current paper denotes they were successful in this. I will be quoting from these contributors to the study of lesbianism (or same-gendered attraction between women) in the medieval period but ultimately find it reductive when there is more language available to us to describe a vast variance of gendered and sexual experiences across time.

While there is other terminology such as “sapphic” (denoting sexual attraction between women and women-aligned people, inclusive to non-lesbian queer women) and “queer” (as in queer history, queer studies) these themselves are responses to limited language within our cultural and academic canon and the developments of a living queer community. In academic settings, and specifically when doing work in the period of Medievalism and Pre-Modern Europe, I find that using more expansive language without applying anachronisms makes a deeper analysis possible of the evidence available before us. The women we are studying lived in a completely different culture and society, with different gendered expectations and understandings of social responsibility, sexuality and sexual variance, and marriage. I think *female sodomy* more accurately depicts the avenue of my own research interests and avenue of my paper than the lesbian-like lens, though I acknowledge its use within the dialogue of queer medieval history. It’s difficult for us as contemporary historians to assess how society recognized “lesbian like” women, because “sources written or created by members of the peasantry and non-elite groups do not survive”,¹⁵ and sources are “dominantly, from a male perspective”.¹⁶ In her research on the lesbian-like figure Bietris de Romans, Benware summarizes the main reasons historians find so little evidence of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Benware, Magie A., “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans”. Page 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

same-sex attraction between women in the medieval period. As women were thought to be inferior to men, “there is already limited evidence of women’s daily lives, let alone their sexualities”.¹⁷ She continues that “Medieval record keepers were rarely concerned with documenting women’s lives or achievements”,¹⁸ which is one of the reasons we simply do not have access to more documents about women in the medieval period, let alone the private sexual thoughts or romantic yearnings of “sexual lesbians” or the “lesbian-like”.

In medieval and pre-modern Europe, women were also believed to be more “easily given to debauchery” than men, and generally more lustful.¹⁹ Brown reflects in her research on the “vast quantities of literature – medical, legal, and theological– going back to Aristotle and the Bible” that showed this “to the satisfaction of contemporary opinion”²⁰ in the medieval period. Sexual misconduct was something women were accused of frequently, aided by these gendered beliefs surrounding lust within the church.

Europe being a phallocentric society, it was a common belief “there was nothing in a woman that could long sustain the sexual desires of another woman”.²¹ Men could be attracted to men and women, and women could be attracted to men, yet people did not consider the coupling of women as sexual, “as they did not involve a phallus”²² and “sperm was considered an essential part of a sexual relationship”.²³ Brown largely argues that same-gendered attraction between women was largely ignored in Europe because of this. She notes that in multiple spheres of medieval life, “law, in medicine, and in the public

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, Page 4.

²⁰ Ibid, Page 5.

²¹ Brown, Judith C. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Page 6.

²² Tideswell, Catherine. “How Far Did Medieval Society Recognize Lesbianism in This Period?”

²³ Benware, Maggie A., “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans.”

mind, sexual relations between women were therefore ignored.”²⁴

As historians we can look through cultural artifacts such as popular literary works of art for a deeper understanding of cultural beliefs in the medieval period. The Italian poet Dante (1265-1321) wrote extensively of the possible sins in his descriptions of the levels of hell and purgatory in his *Divine Comedy*. Yet in his writings, there are no mentions of female sodomites. There are sodomites in the hell of his imagination, but they are clearly described as male.²⁵ Brown also points to Boccaccio (1313-1375) in her research, who had much to say on the sins of humanity and was known for his commentary on people and their complicated relations to each other. Yet there are also no mentions in his works of female sodomy.²⁶ Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the 13th century scholastic theologian and Doctor of the Church, would include female sodomy as a one of four categories of vice against nature in his *Summa theologiae*.²⁷ This included masturbation, bestiality, coitus in an unnatural position, then “copulation with an undue sex, male with male, or female with female”, the vice of sodomy.²⁸ He would influence many later theologians, citing Aquinas in their own works.²⁹ This would include the likes of Sylvester Prierias in his confessional material and Jean Garson, a fifteenth century rector of the University of Paris, who listed sex between women in his list of crimes against nature^{25, 30} Tideswell argues that same-sex acts between women in these penitentials demonstrates “to a certain extent... female same sex relations were recognized as a theoretical possibility”^{26, 31} within ecclesiastical sources. The church from very early on had established its leanings on sexual misconduct within penitentials,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Aquinas, Thomas. “Medieval Sourcebook: Aquinas on *Unnatural Sex*”. Internet History Sourcebooks Project. January, 2023. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/aquinas-homo.asp>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Brown, Judith C. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Page 7.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

“medieval manuals of penance”³² that essentially catalogue sins in groups. They seek to provide clarity to clergy who must advise their parishioners. In Catherine Tideswell’s article, she explains that penitentials are frequently explicit in nature, as they are intending to “account for most sexual crimes conceivable”,³³ which means in the past they have been edited by academics or “disregarded as sources”.³⁴

The Corrector or Medicus, by Burchard of Worms (d.1025), is a penitential in the style of a long list of questions and theoretical circumstances a Christian could be in which would require different penance. These penances ranged in severity, and some were harsher than others. His intent in writing was to teach “to every priest, even the most simple, how to help each person, ordained or not ordained, poor, rich, child, young adult, old, decrepit, in health or sickness, of every age and both sexes.”³⁵ The text is concerned with outlining family lines and what interactions count as incestuous, what is adulterous, and the proper behaviors for men and women.

The *Medicus* lists three entries for sexual relations between women. Burchard of Worms’ penitential describes frottage between women: “when they want to extinguish the sexual desire that torments them they join together as if they ought and are able to couple; they mutually join their genitals and by rubbing they try to extinguish their desire”, which would gain them penance three times forty days on bread and water.³⁶ This in itself is still a lax punishment in comparison to execution. The *Medicus* prescribes penance for five years for a woman fornicating with a woman with an insertable object, while a woman fornicating alone by herself with the aforementioned insertable object is penance

³² Ibid.

³³ Tideswell, Catherine. “How Far Did Medieval Society Recognize Lesbianism in This Period?”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Burchard of Worms. *The Corrector or Medicus*, Book 19. Translator: Sean D. Murphy. October: 2012. Page 1.

³⁶ Ibid, Page 7.

for one year.³⁷ This is in contrast to the penance for male masturbation with or without an aid which is a matter of days.³⁸ It's been noted that the perceived seriousness of the crime by secular or ecclesiastical records are increased when there is the use of a foreign, insertable object. The Venerable Bede's penitential stipulates four years for undefined acts of sodomy,³⁹ three years for "a woman fornicating with a woman",⁴⁰ yet it's an entire seven years for "nuns with a nun by means of an instrument".⁴¹ Bede's penitential directly notes the possibility of inter-nun sexual relations, and with an object. Tideswell in her article on the recognition of same-gendered attraction between women in the medieval period examined the social standing of the women in different trials for female sodomy, noting that differing social status "seems to have made a difference to the perceived seriousness of the crime".⁴²

Who the women were in their community mattered, and much of the documentation we have coming from the church means the majority of our cases for female sodomy are about women who were nuns, or "lesbian-like" by means of their life and profession. Benware's paper discusses inter-nun sexual relations at length, and she states the majority of evidence for "sexual lesbians"⁴³ is found within the church. This would make sense, since this is where, as stated previously, the majority of records of female sodomy are found.

Brown notes in her book that convents were "notorious for their loose moral standards" and "sexual license"⁴⁴ stating that they were "warehouses for the discarded women of middle-class and patrician families"⁴⁵ more often than they were "women with a strong religious vocation".⁴⁶ In the case

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tideswell, Catherine. "How Far Did Medieval Society Recognize Lesbianism in This Period?"

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Benware, Maggie A., "Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans."

⁴⁴ Brown, Judith C. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Page 4.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of Benedetta the nun, “sexual allegations against Benedetta would not have been all that rare”, especially in Protestant countries, or “in intellectual circles in Catholic countries that placed themselves in opposition to the church”.⁴⁷ Nuns loving nuns became “one more nasty charge against a corrupt institution”⁴⁸ for many and is still a trope today in movies and literature. Bawdy jokes about nuns are played for laughs but have basis in historical evidence.

An explicit letter between two Bavarian nuns examined in Benware’s research “shows that lesbian sex did occur, and that lesbian relationships were not only based on emotional attractions that could never lead to physical relationships, which is in contrast to the “lesbian-like.”⁴⁹ One nun writes to another: “it kills me to remember how you touched my breasts.”⁵⁰ Benware differentiates between the “lesbian-like” and “sexual lesbians” within the church as the likelihood the women would have had to have been able to act upon their same-gendered attraction. Some women, such as nuns, just had a more conceivable means of having sex with other women. Within the medieval family unit, many women didn’t have the same opportunities for privacy and the opportunity to act on desirous feelings.⁵¹

By 1477, there would be no established language surrounding legal discourse for same sex crimes between women. In the case of Katherina Hetzeldorfer, historians note her trial “is given no name in the proceedings”.⁵² Hetzeldorfer was ultimately executed, and her behavior is noted as masculine, deviating “from that of social convention”.⁵³ From Katherina’s death, we can draw conclusions around medieval women’s safety in regards to risk of fatal punishment, and that to be

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Benware, Maggie A., “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Puff, Helmet. “Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477).”

⁵³ Ibid.

visibly masculine or threatening to phallogentric religious society was more swiftly cut down by that society.

Far before the 12th century there was already a clear stance taken by church officials on the subject of sodomy, with penitentials showing the theoretically possible sex acts between women, and popular philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Peter Abelard giving up contemporary insight into cultural fears surrounding women's sexuality and female sodomy as sexual deviance within ecclesiastical records. While there was some theoretical understanding under patriarchal, phallogentric medieval Western society that sex between women could in fact happen, a romantic bond is largely unrecognized and because phallogentric sex is largely an act done *unto* someone else instead of done between two participants.

By the 16th century, female sodomites began to be recognized by confirming an enlarged clitoris,⁵⁴ as for the women to sodomize each other physically. Disagreements surrounding “how to deal with lesbian sexuality”⁵⁵ were being widely printed and circulated throughout Europe that “betray a fundamental ignorance about what women did with each other and how that fit into established sexual categories and sexual crimes.”⁵⁶ Debates around the severity of punishment for female sodomy spread, with many advocating for the death penalty for these women. Through all this, there can still be found the lesbian-like and sexual-lesbians, intersecting with the study of Female Husbands: husbands born female, married to women, who cropped up over hundreds of years and can always benefit from more research. In conclusion, female sodomy in the medieval period is rarer in comparison to accounts of sodomy between men and most of our evidence of these occurrences come from ecclesiastical accounts in Europe. The past scholarship in the field of medieval lesbian studies using the “lesbian-like” lens has

⁵⁴ Brown, Judith C. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Page 18-19.

⁵⁵ Ibid, Page 15.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

accounted for women outside of the specific parameters of “sexual lesbians”; women who had the opportunity to act on same-gendered attraction sexually. As this paper is specific to accounts of female sodomy in the medieval period there is much that goes beyond the scope of this project into the Early Modern period.

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