

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Tom Linkinen

Same-sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture

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Cover illustration: Punishment for sodomy carved in stone, from the right, Lincoln Cathedral, a reconstruction of a twelfth-century stone frieze

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Introduction

1 In search of same-sex sexuality and later medieval English culture

Sodomy: An unnatural form of sexual intercourse, esp. that of one male with another.¹

The definition of sodomy from the first and the second editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* represents a framework of same-sex sexuality that may sound “medieval,” yet the authoritative lexicon served its readers this piece of information a couple of decades, not a couple of centuries ago.² Such a definition is also an argument, pointing towards the unnatural in sexual acts between people of the same sex, and revealing the condemnatory approach to same-sex sexuality in our modern culture not so long ago. Similar arguments are relatively easy to find in medieval culture, be the source a theological treatise, an exemplum recalling morals, a chronicle, or a piece of poetry.

Associating the definition above with the “medieval” may lead a reader to one major presumption regarding medieval culture; namely that of its grave morals and repressive tone against anything different. The truthfulness of this presumption has been established successfully, and this aspect of medieval culture has traditionally been emphasised in much of the historical research – research that did not contradict with definitions found in dictionaries. A second presumption regarding medieval culture would perhaps be that it gave rise to carnivals and care-free joyfulness.³ A third one could probably recollect violence, torture and executions, with same-sex sexual matters included in such considerations.⁴ All these modern-day generalisations regarding the Middle Ages are, of course, only

1 The entry to the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the one published in 1989, can be found here: <http://www.oed.com/oed2/00229910>.

2 The third edition published online in 2013 has, finally, updated the definition as follows: “Originally: any form of sexual intercourse considered to be unnatural. Now chiefly: anal intercourse”: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183887>.

3 These two contradictory stereotypical images are commonly shared, and also precisely the ones that Ruth Mazo Karras points at in opening her survey on sexuality in medieval Europe: Karras 2005b, 1, 2.

4 An image recalled, for example, by Carolyn Dinshaw in her title “Getting Medieval” of her study on sexualities and communities of both pre- and postmodern times, relating the ultra-violent line “I’m gonna git medieval with your ass” from Quentin Tarantino’s movie *Pulp Fiction* to ideas

partial aspects of the story.⁵ This is precisely the case with the repeated assumptions regarding medieval dealings with same-sex sexual matters. The aim of this study is to elaborate the manifoldness of later medieval English considerations of same-sex sexual deeds and thoughts, considerations that seem to have found multiple contexts, and to have been considered as everything from stinking deeds to deepest love.

The study at hand focuses on the understanding of same-sex sexuality in later medieval England. Under consideration are a variety of definitions and approaches, attitudes and beliefs, as well as emotions and experiences about same-sex sexuality among the English in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the period commonly known as the Later Middle Ages. This period contains roughly the years between the aftermath of the bubonic plague, the “Black Death” in 1348-1349, and the beginning of the sixteenth century and the coronation of Henry VIII in 1509.⁶ It was a period of deep stabilities and also of sudden turmoil. Early-fourteenth-century Englishmen witnessed population growth as well as famines, the major one lasting for years from 1315 onwards, and the plague, or “Black Death” beginning in 1348, which left English society and culture to recover from its mental and economic effects, as well as several subsequent “minor” plagues. This recovery lasted well into the sixteenth century.⁷ On one hand, stability was

of possible medieval receptions of a queer. Dinshaw’s polemical touch on Middle English matters concerning same-sex sexual aspects is one of the thought-provoking backgrounds in this study.

5 As elaborated in Miri Rubin’s overview of multiplicity of medieval studies in the twenty-first century, its title pointing to “Getting Less Medieval with the Past”: Rubin 2002, esp. 14-17.

6 Frames of the epoch later titled as the Late Middle Ages as well as the area under consideration are, of course, approximate just as they are symbolic. Two valuable overviews in this study, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (2004) by P.J.P. Goldberg and *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (2005) by Miri Rubin, reveal the unsettled limits in both the era and in the area; for Goldberg the era lengthens to beyond the coronation of Henry VIII but concentrates exclusively on England inside its medieval and modern boundaries; for Rubin the epoch means roughly the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, ending at the coronation of not Henry VIII in 1509 but Henry VII in 1485, and geographically includes all the British Isles. I am concentrating on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and due to the sources the past offers, the stress is especially on the late fourteenth century due to the larger amount of relevant texts that date from that time. In referring to the period as “premodern” rather than “late medieval” I point towards a larger time-scale, including the medieval and early modern era extending to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially when I address arguments focusing on premodern culture, particularly Mikhail Bakhtin 1968, Jean Delumeau 1990, and Michel Foucault 1990. Geographically, the focus is inside the borders of England then and now – yet not exclusively so, for no island is an island.

7 For an overview of early-fourteenth-century famine: Goldberg 2004, 147-160, and Rubin 2005, 17-22. For a detailed survey of the “Black Death” and the deep, long-lasting socioeconomic effects it caused: Dyer 1989, esp. 1-10, 140-160, 204-210, and 274-277. About the effects of the “Black Death” also: Goldberg 2004, 161-173, and Rubin 2005, esp. 57-70.



offered by – and relied upon – the belief-system, rituals and traditions of the Catholic Church. Yet there were also challenges to the church's authority by the religious reform movement the Lollards with the theologian John Wycliffe as their doctrinal leader at the end of the fourteenth century.⁸ These religious disputes also took on “sodomitical” dimensions.⁹ On the other hand, stability was maintained by approved hierarchies, social interaction and social control functioning in villages, towns, monasteries, and courts, but was challenged by all things sudden and different; namely behaviour considered unfit and foreign, as well as mutinies such as the Peasants' Revolt led by Wat Tyler in 1381.¹⁰ Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England witnessed ongoing discussions concerning King Edward II and his assumed sins – and his assumed lovers.¹¹ Repetitively re-narrated were also the accusations against the organisation of Knights Templar, an order that was famously abolished and found heretic at the beginning of the fourteenth century and left a darkened legend behind.¹² Memories of the Templars re-echoed in arguments written in several chronicles completed during the latter part of the fourteenth century, which contain considerations very relevant to the study at hand. In most of all the issues mentioned above, arguments concerning same-sex sexual acts and desire were used as weapons against same-sex sexuality.

Same-sex sexuality was an inseparable part of later medieval English culture; the issue appeared in contexts ranging from practices of social control to central theological and political disputes. These acts and desires were repeatedly discussed and pondered, and, whether as stigmatising sins or something else, they had their part in the ongoing narrative tradition. The matter had a place and gained attention in most major political and religious discussions and debates of later medieval England, all of which are

8 For information on the Lollard discourses of later medieval English texts: Hudson 1988; Knapp 1990, esp. 61-94. For a historiography concerning the Lollards and their writings: Peikola 2000, 1-15; also Goldberg 2004, 233-237, and Rubin 2005, esp. 148-154.

9 Dinshaw 1999, esp. 55-99, Karras 2005a, esp. 203-204. All of these disputes are scrutinised in this study.

10 For late-fourteenth-century English texts in relation to the mutiny of 1381: Crane 1992; for the revolt as a central turmoil of fourteenth-century English social history: Goldberg 2004, 174-185; and also Rubin 2005, esp. 122-128.

11 For a general survey on the king and his companion Piers Gaveston: Chaplais 1994; Rubin 2005; overview about the king, esp. 29-39, and his deposition *ibid.*, 52-56; and also Karras 2005a, 193-194.

12 For rumours of sodomy in relation to those concerning Knights Templar: Gilmour-Bryson 1996; for sodomy as a particular discursive weapon in the case of Knights Templar: Zeikowitz 2003, esp. 107-113; and for an updated analysis of medieval connotations between the Templar and sodomy: Karras 2006, esp. 276-279.

considered in detail in this study. Arguments concerning same-sex sexual matters varied to a great extent, assuming forms that ranged from theological concerns of sodomy and sin against nature to the commonly shared, rather simple idea of unmentionable vice, and from the condemnatory rumours about Kings Edward II (who reigned from 1307 to 1327) and Richard II (who reigned from 1377 to 1399) and their assumed lovers to rhetorical accusations made by religious reformists as well as by the established church, and also from very explicitly expressed feelings of disgust, guilt, and fear to laughter and curiosity. These varied yet overlapping themes were present in later medieval discussions about same-sex sexuality. Also, same-sex desire and love, and some same-sex couples, may have found possibilities of fitting into and taking part in later medieval English culture. All of these aforementioned aspects are under consideration in this study, which builds upon a variety of sources ranging from chronicles to poetry, not forgetting the few pictorial sources.¹³ Precisely due to these multifaceted discussions that occurred during the period I regard later medieval England as a fruitful focus for this study.

The most visible expression of same-sex sexual acts and desire was condemnation and repression. Another of its prevalent aspects is that of prevailing silence. Then, too, further reading and digging for traces make one confront a noticeable amount of noise and rhetorical dirt. An extended journey into the later medieval understanding of the matter subsequently brings one into the midst of nightmares, then a couple of jokes and, finally, offers possible glimpses of some immortalised love stories. The structure of this study follows this order, building from more expected to more unexpected treatments of the matter, and follows the six main suggestions regarding the issue's chief questions, constructed in six main chapters to be specified in what follows. Each main question is based on later medieval English approaches towards same-sex sexual matters and is considered in relation to combinations of understandings, definitions, emotions and experiences related to same-sex sexual acts, desire, and the people involved in them in one way or another. The focus is on approaches dictated by the

13 Various continental sources are also at table; circulation of different texts was noteworthy in medieval Europe, and English audiences circulated especially French texts, translating most popular ones as time passed. For circulating texts in the later medieval European cultural sphere, especially between Italy, France and England, texts which, for example, Michael Hanly describes as the tips of the icebergs of European thinking being only the visible peaks of all what was thought: Hanly 1997; For a thorough conclusion on later medieval written culture: Saenger 1997, esp. 256-276; for an argument on the importance of circulation of texts touching most levels of later medieval culture before printing: Fox 2000, esp. 12-13.

later medieval English themselves, considering what they evidently wrote and read and, during the process of sharing and interpreting information while writing and reading, what *they* might have considered about same-sex sexuality.

The first chapter, titled “Framing condemnations: Sodomy, sin against nature and crime” focuses on the later medieval framework of thorough condemnation of same-sex sexuality, constructed through arguments framed by ideas of sin, nature, gender disorder, and criminality.¹⁴ The concepts of sodomy, sin against nature, and crime were the main medieval approaches explicitly engaged with same-sex sexual matters, defined and used purposely and exclusively for condemnation. Condemnatory arguments were repeatedly based on and framed through these aforementioned concepts from which the condemnations drew their strength. The crossing of gender boundaries and their hierarchical order proves to have been a major and intractable problem in efforts to define and confront these matters. Criminality, at times judicially but more often rhetorically, was also an inseparable theme and concept in this framework.

In the second chapter, titled “Silencing the unmentionable vice,” I will scrutinize the silence surrounding this issue in later medieval English texts, both the lack of any comments on same-sex sexuality and the explicit, condemnatory silencing of the matter. Silence and silencing proves to be an approach of its own, naming same-sex sexual wrongs as “the unmentionable vice,” a description repetitively emphasised both during and long after medieval times.¹⁵ “Keeping silent is itself an act of communication,” as Peter Burke suggests, and then the explicit silencing appears to point towards a quite strict guidance of keeping the silence.¹⁶ Michel Foucault’s famous yet evasive remarks regarding medieval silence as counter-evidence or contrast to his argument on the modern scientific classification of sexuality have gained numerous adherents and detractors. His “logic of censorship” explains some probable motives for this silencing: following this logic of causality by which an act is first prohibited, and then prevented it from

14 These arguments were by no means stagnant, but there were tries to keep them in various, repeatedly considered frames in the medieval past. These efforts were, however, ongoing processes, just as interpreting them by a (post)modern historian is, and that is why I choose to refer to them in present, active tense, following the idea and a use of word offered by Sarah Key and Miri Rubin in the introduction for collection of arguments on the history of the body “Framing Medieval Bodies” edited by them: Key and Rubin 1994, esp. 3-4.

15 As, for example, in Michael Goodich’s earlier, groundbreaking study titled *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Middle Ages* (1979).

16 Burke 1993, 123.



being discussed at all, leading to denials of its very existence, serves a useful tool in approaching silences of our own time, yet not necessarily those of the medieval past.¹⁷ The questions posed by both of the first two chapters lie on rather common presumptions; the concepts of sodomy, sin against nature, crime, and unmentionable vice can be seen as the most relevant components to have been elucidated within the history of same-sex sexual matters for a long time. It is a history that often bypasses the field of studies of medieval culture, but these concepts can also be identified as such in several more specific considerations regarding medieval sexual matters. But, such considerations are but parts of the wider scheme.

In the third chapter, titled “Stigmatising with same-sex sexuality,” my focus is on noise rather than silence. Same-sex sexual acts and desire had their part as stigmatising weapons in arguments and accusations in the field of political and religious debates in later medieval England. The disapproving memories of the Kings Edward II and Richard II and their assumed partners, the Lollards’ attacks on the Catholic Church, and the narrative traditions that perpetuated memories of the Knights Templar all included accusations of same-sex sexual acts. These were “narrative assaults,” as Miri Rubin describes similar attacks against medieval Jews, and these assaults led to more complex narrations and, at times, also actions.¹⁸ However, assaults were seldom pointed directly nor primarily against same-sex sexual acts and desires; instead, they were more often used as tools against the accused ones. The judgemental discussions strengthening and creating accumulative negative accusations towards and around same-sex sexuality are the main consideration of the third chapter.

“Sharing disgust and fear,” the fourth chapter, concentrates on the condemnation that occurred through sharing impressions and experiences precisely about same-sex sexuality, focusing on expressions of repulsive emotions in a variety of different texts. This outlook, namely the wrongness of same-sex sexual acts and desires, was constructed by means of sharing negative impressions in detail in several English texts, especially poetry touching on apocalyptic visions and those describing the nightmares of hell. The sharing that occurred in such texts served not only to conceptualise the wrong nor merely to use it as a defamatory weapon; it also described experiences of same-sex sexuality, and used all the possibilities of the imagination in instilling disgust and causing readers to ponder the possible

17 Foucault 1990, esp. 84.

18 Rubin 1999, esp. 1-6, 193-194; for detailed arguments on the ambivalent nature of the reputation of King Edward the Second see Mortimer 2010, esp. 45-60.



guilt of a sinner reflectively. I consider Jean Delumeau's approach towards what he calls "guilt culture" and "guilt mentality" as a practical tool in an effort to understand the fear and alarm addressed towards one's own potential sins.¹⁹ In addition, the famous theses of the anthropologist Mary Douglas, albeit not addressed towards medieval culture, prove useful in facing texts explicating disgust and fear as negative consequences of the perceived impurity of such sinful activities.²⁰ At their repeated extreme, such narratives were situated beyond the known world as they ventured into the nightmarish reverse landscapes and, finally into the eternal tortures in hell.

The fifth chapter, titled "Sharing laughter," builds on the notion of laughter as means of dealing with same-sex sexuality in later medieval England. The chapter's first section is based on few possible traces of that humour, discernible in both written and illustrated forms. The second section focuses on the particular case of Geoffrey Chaucer's famous and much considered Pardoner figure from *The Canterbury Tales*, approached as a contradictory literary character that has been laughed at for a variety of reasons. Laughter seems to have appeared mostly for moral purposes, being yet another method of condemning same-sex sexuality. The social historian Keith Thomas characterises condemnatory laughter as a method of relieving anxieties, and, as cultural historian Anu Korhonen has fittingly summarised Thomas's conclusion, laughter often proves to have been "a crude instrument of moral censorship."²¹ Also, laughing at same-sex sexuality may have included aspects of interest motivated by entertainment due to the ongoing desire for jokes among the later medieval English people as they laughed, nervous yet amusedly, while being entertained by such comedy.

"Framing possibilities: Silences, friendships, and deepest love," the sixth and the last chapter of the study at hand, differs from earlier chapters in its

19 Delumeau 1990, 1-5; more detail about the "guilt mentality" in *ibid.*, esp. 219-220.

20 Douglas 2002; for a now classic consideration of fruitful combining of methods of both history and anthropology: Darnton 1990, 329-353; for applying Douglas's theoretical apparatus in interpreting medieval repressive culture towards major minorities: Moore 1990, esp. 100-101; and in interpreting idea of bodily impurity of Christian women engaged in sex with Muslims or Jews in later medieval Spain: Nirenberg 1996, 151-152; but, for critical cautiousness for aforementioned Moore and others using Douglas's theory in interpreting medieval history: *ibid.*, 241-243; Mary Douglas herself, in her updated preface for 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger*, recalls herself how her approach was left short in the first place in considering more sensitive contextualisation: Douglas 2002, esp. xiii-xvi.

21 Thomas 1977, esp. 77; and Korhonen 1999, 24. Convincing argument by Thomas on the history of laughter in studying Tudor and Stuart England was published in *Times Literary Supplement* in January 1977 and still remains an accurate standpoint for the cultural history of laughter.

approach, as the focus there is on implicit possibilities for desire and love rather than on scrutiny of explicit and implicit condemnation. First, there was room for possibility behind the silence and silencing, as well as behind the confusion around definitions and concepts which at times appears to have relied on contradictory and loose conclusions, and often amounted to a silence of its own, especially when women were concerned. Second, the closest friendships, involving lifelong partners who lived their lives together and, in the end, were buried together, were celebrated in the literary tradition of chivalric texts, but, to some extent, also occurred in the “real” lives of the later medieval English. I will consider these stories at length as an essential part of my work. Third, and in relation to friendships, the praise for the deepest love between same-sex friends in later medieval England had already inspired a long tradition reaching back to ancient culture. In closing my study, I wish to suggest that the tradition of celebrated love between men was a part of understanding same-sex relationships, whether considered as erotic or not.

In my aim to gain access to aspects of later medieval English understanding, my main tool is the analysis of ongoing sharing of arguments regarding same-sex sexuality in the past – the sharing of understanding in later medieval England. I approach different arguments as fragments of wider discussions. They consisted of agreements and disagreements, and I contend that the arguments made often also presupposed agreements within their audiences, or implied attacks against those presumed to disagree. In search of this sharing of ideas, I look for the communicative process of taking part in the variegated arguments about same-sex sexual acts and desire; that is what I mean by “discussion” in this work. Discussions were addressed towards, took flight from, and actively shaped the later medieval English context and its culture. Through discussions, aspects of understanding found their forms, and this shared understanding is how I see cultural history taking shape in this work. The exchange of presuppositions, agreements and disagreements is how I see the past culture becoming accessible in this study.

My main research method in mapping out and interpreting this shared understanding is the use of all possible relevant sources to be found, as they are the very traces of the culture and its discussions. The definition of culture as a communicative field of constructed understandings and meanings is common in the field of cultural history towards which my work is addressed. I am following methodologies prescribed by cultural history as I ask “not only ‘How it really was’ but rather ‘How it was for him, or her, or them?’” as Miri Rubin has summarised it.²² A similar approach

22 Rubin 2002, 81.



to the new history of sexuality has been characterised earlier by Ruth Mazo Karras, who emphasises the way in which the question of “What did people do and how often did they do it?” can be enlarged as the question of “How did people think about sexuality, and how did this affect the way they thought about and behaved toward women and men?”²³ Apart from discovering and analysing the explicit arguments of the past, the task set in this work is also that of making sense of traces of the past as they cling into the *possible actuality* of seeking for what may have been thought and what may have been discussed. I wish to call this aspect of my project a “horizon of possibilities,” having the possible dimensions – and limits – of interpretations of a past observer in my mind.²⁴ I see the interpreting of *possible* past interpretations as a main key in my effort to understand some past understanding.²⁵

Cultural historian Robert Darnton emphasises the scholarly possibilities of a historian’s making sense of past understandings, providing some guidelines for my approach in this study:

23 Karras 1996, 131; about an historian’s interest towards “what was thought to be happening” instead of what actually did happen, see also Kaartinen 2002, 3.

24 Here I am loosely following the description and the idea of Hans Robert Jauss who, in considering the overlapping ideas of past, present and future, draws the line between experiences and expectations as “spaces of experience” and “horizon of expectation”: Jauss 1982, esp. 20-28; also, cultural historian Hannu Salmi persuasively situates the possible in history and the history of possibilities within the frames of “historical horizon of events” and, quoting Carlo Ginzburg, “horizon of latent possibilities”: Salmi 2011, 172, 186.

25 Famously, the scrutinised past understandings have many approaches and names. Jacques Le Goff, a well-known medievalist taking part in the history of mentalities, has suggested the history of imagination to replace the aforementioned term: Le Goff 1988, esp. 3; equally famously, Michel Foucault builds his idea of culture on *episteme* where discourses are structured and, in turn, when structured considerable, meaningful or/and imperative, they structure the *episteme* forming and creating knowledge and the ways and dimensions considered suitable and applicable to argument the knowledge: Foucault 1972, esp. 49, 229; Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge summarised, for example, in During 1993, 92-146; and applied by a cultural historian Chartier in Chartier 1988, esp. 10-13 and Chartier 1995, esp. 88-90; to clarify, by discussion in this work I am not straightforwardly referring to a foucauldian approach towards past culture by means of discourse analysis, although the approach of sharing of understandings simultaneously forming understandings in a twofold way owes a lot to the foucauldian tradition. Chartier has further suggested the past under consideration consisting of representations as messengers from the past, using a concept more widely in use among art historians: Chartier 1988, 9-14, and Chartier 1997, esp. 2-3. Finally, Robert Darnton has suggested the simple use of cultural history more than twenty years ago, be it the reach into the past reading audience’s receptions and interpretations, or into the thoughts of the so-called “ordinary people”: Darnton 1985, esp. 3. There lies, however, a common ground from history of mentalities to discourse analysis to rely on: the honest effort to understand past understandings. An idea of shared understanding in a culture of particular space and time is an equivalent of an approach I feel comfortable with.

If we could understand how he has read, we could come closer to understanding how he made sense of life; and this way, the historical way, we might even satisfy some of our own craving for meaning.²⁶

Darnton focuses on his study of the history of reading in its potential for historical research. The question of “how he [or she] made sense of life” guides historical inquiry towards foundational questions in cultural history both past and present. The possibility of understanding same-sex sexuality from a variety of standpoints is inseparable from this process of “making sense of life.” I suggest that an approach towards past understandings through the focus on past reading and writing is the main possible way to make sense of the past. Sharing thoughts in written form was but one of the ways understandings were spread; yet the written thoughts are the very arguments available to be analysed by historians of today. The idea of “satisfying some of our own craving for meaning” explains, I hope, my motives in this study in full; I consider that writing, reading, and interpreting shaped past culture as it is understood in cultural history. That is a culture as an active, communicative field where the ongoing constructions of understandings and meanings took place. Surviving documents of the culture, most of them texts, are the primary sources in shaping our understanding of the past, yet some pictorial material also contributes to our perceptions. In nourishing our “craving for meaning” from such documents, whether we call our method reception theory, semiotics, or something else, the consideration of processes of writing and reading bears the culture as a field of meaning-making in mind.²⁷ I see this idea of culture as an active meaning-making process that takes place through reading and writing as the accessible gateway to an understanding of the past understandings.

Darnton draws attention to the way in which “every narrative presupposes a reader” and my approach to past texts likewise insists that every writer also presupposes a reader, and every reader in turn relies on meanings

26 Cultural historian Robert Darnton on studying the history of reading as cultural history: Darnton 1993, 162.

27 For the principles of reader's reception theory, approached as a scholar of literature looking into history, but just as fruitful to read the other way around: Jauss 1982, 3-45; for Jauss's reader's reception theory in direct relation to medieval literature: *ibid.*, 76-109; for the now classic thesis of the semiotic approach towards past texts: Eco 1976, esp. 3-46, for opening strange meanings by means of semiotics, esp. 200-260; for a convincing application of Eco's semiotic apparatus focusing exclusively on medieval sermons: Edden 1992, esp. 215-217.

shared with a writer.²⁸ Past texts are not entities. They carry no meanings in isolation. I understand past writings as inseparable parts of the past culture. The question of how a past writer may have imagined his or her readers and audiences may be a fruitful approach in reaching towards some past “meaning.” The writer’s presumptions guided his or her writings, which, in turn, guided the understandings of a reader. This created a web of agreements and disagreements, and a web of shared understanding, which I would like to call culture.²⁹ Treating the primary sources, the fragments of texts and other traces of later medieval English culture as jigsaw pieces within a wider collection of meanings is the best method I can think of in my effort to extract meaning from this past culture.

In describing the focus of my work as same-sex sexuality, my purpose, quite simply, is to use a concept covering the whole variety of sexual acts and desires towards and between persons belonging to the same sex. An increasingly established concept in scholarly discussions as it is, the concept of same-sex sexuality is not among the more commonly used terms outside the academia, and did not exist in the medieval past at all.³⁰ Yet, same-sex sexuality is the best concept I can come up with; a concept not too modern and not too postmodern, yet understandable enough in our own time. My chosen avoidance of the concepts of “homosexuality,” “lesbianism” and “bisexuality” throughout the work is due to their profound association with modern contexts. Homosexuality, the most common label applied to same-sex sexuality today, includes connotations of sexual identities and also communities fundamentally situated in the framework of modern, rather than medieval culture.³¹

28 Darnton 1993, 158; Darnton’s conclusion probably follows Jauss’s repeatedly suggested idea of the reader’s preceding experience and the literary work’s presupposed audience: Jauss 1982, 3-45, esp. 20-22, 25-28.

29 Culture which includes, as Roger Chartier describes, “constructing communities of readers as ‘interpretative communities’”: Chartier 1994, 23.

30 As an established scholarly concept the wide-covering, self-descriptive term is often at use nowadays as, for example, in Frantzen 1998; as well as in Sautman and Sheingorn 2001b. For a notable example of the use of the concept same-sex sexuality to cover the cross-cultural approaches for “global history of same-sex sexuality” in contemporary cultural studies: Rupp 2001.

31 Concepts of ‘homosexuality’ and simultaneously that of ‘heterosexuality’ were structured as part of the late-nineteenth-century attempt to create ‘scientific’ classifications of human sexuality, purposely covering acts and desires just as well as – and quite importantly – all the persons engaged with them. The concept, a Greco-Roman hybrid of a word itself was first used in 1869 by Austro-Hungarian journalist and legal activist Karoly Maria Kertneby (also known as Benkert), and in English the use of the concept became more widely used in the end of the nineteenth century. About the history of the modern concept for same-sex sexual acts and desire: Weeks 1991, esp. 16; Plummer 1992, 3-25; and specifically in relation to approaches of psychology and literature of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modern culture: Kekki 2003, esp. 26-32.

Past meanings call for contextual caution and the understanding of sex and sexuality was anchored differently in the premodern cultural negotiations than it is in discussions of our own time.³² The concept of “sodomy” appears to be equally misleading due to its completely condemnatory tone, revealing but one side of the story.³³ The later medieval English idea of “sodomy” and the related concepts of “sin against nature,” “unmentionable vice” as well as the varied meanings of friendship and love differed, varied, overlapped, and accumulated. All these medieval meanings were included in the collective and enclosing theme of same-sex sexuality in later medieval England, and all of them are scrutinised in this study as aspects of a cross-cultural and cross-historical – yet hopefully understandable – concept of same-sex sexuality.

2 Primary sources: Discussing the versatile past

My study is anchored in primary sources, and in using a variety of possible sources touching on same-sex sexuality, my purpose is to sew up the occasional lack of multiple arguments, and let the past appear with all of its contradictions.³⁴ One’s first impression is the comparative absence of sources. Closer examination, however, reveals a number of comments and possibilities, and a complex view opens up to be interpreted. A touch on numerous, varied source materials is part of the methodology of this book; I believe that this way traces of the versatile and often contradictory past may reveal itself in a rewarding way.

A good number of approaches towards same-sex sexuality can be found in theological treatises and summaries, handbooks intended to guide their readers in penitence and in leading a “good” Christian life, as well as handbooks for priests, and theological treatises. An important

32 Thus, the table must be – and is – cleared from ‘homosexuality’, ‘heterosexuality’, and also from ‘sexualities’; for a revealing introduction and a summary on this by means of a historian: Karras 2005b, 5-9, esp. 8; for a more provocative yet very welcomed argument I invite everyone who reads this to also familiarise themselves with a scholarly summons titled “Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies”: Schultz, 2006, *passim*; and Karma Lochrie also distinguishes her approach towards the Middle Ages from concepts of heterosexuality and heteronormativity: Lochrie 2005, esp. xiii-xv.

33 The concept of sodomy as fundamental judgement will be critically considered in section I.1.

34 My method of using various sources follows the idea albeit lacks the thoroughness of Natalie Zemon Davis who, in her famous study *The Return of Martin Guerre*, elaborates her scholarly task as “full-scale historical treatment, using every scrap of paper left me by the past”: Davis 1987, ix; for a summary of an historian’s methodological interest in using “as varied sources as possible”: Kaartinen 2002, 6; and Karras 2005b, 9-19.



group of sources consists of manuals concerning penance, and among them are the influential and highly detailed *Fasciculus morum* in Latin, as well as multiple English-language sources including *Handlyng Synne*, the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, *Jacob's Well*, and *Instructions for Parish Priests*, which all touch upon same-sex sexual matters approaching them as sins to be strongly avoided.³⁵ *Instructions for Parish Priests* was a handbook for parsons including practical advice regarding the spiritual care of their parishioners written by a man of the church, a canon of the Augustinian order named John Mirk in Shropshire sometime between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.³⁶ Written in common English, the work includes revealing considerations and pieces of advice for priests to apply in their preaching and their teaching, as well as guidelines as to how the priests themselves should behave. In the end, all the books mentioned focus on vices and virtues, and on the problems with confession.

An important trace of the period's understanding of same-sex sexuality regarding especially women can be found in the text *Ancrene Wisse*. This guide for anchoresses is a moral and spiritual handbook for communities of lay women who chose to live in devotional isolation. It was written in the first half of the thirteenth century, and was, as such, a product of high rather than late medieval culture in the first place, but it was then circulated and copied in England as an influential text for three hundred years until the sixteenth century.³⁷ *Ancrene Wisse* is a particularly unique text since it was

35 All these texts offered both theoretical and practical advice to their later medieval readers, most of whom were clerical; for the Latin mid-fourteenth-century manual *Fasciculus morum* my source is *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, edited and translated by Siegfried Wenzel (*Fasciculus morum* 1989), and I am relying on this translation in this study; for Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* the source is the edition by Idelle Sullens (Mannyng 1983); For *The Book of Vices and Virtues* my source is *The Book of Vices and Virtues* 1968; For *Jacob's Well*, my source is the edition by Brandeis (*Jacob's Well* 1900); and for *Instructions for Parish Priests* the source is Mirk 1974.

36 For brief background information considering John Mirk, see, for example, the preface to Mirk 1974.

37 *Ancrene Wisse* is the title of the original manuscript, and the title *Ancrene Riwe* occasionally customary in various later ones. The text was also translated from English into French and Latin, somewhat unusually for a text originally written in English in that time revealing the pioneering importance of the text in medieval European level; four manuscripts have survived, although there's knowledge of at least 13 copies made: Potts, Stevenson and Wogan-Browne 1993, vii; White 1993, vii-viii, 201 notes 1-2; as the editions made are based on the earliest manuscripts from the late twelfth century, which themselves are examples from the earliest Middle English written, the language had changed noticeably by the times of later Middle English and is remarkably hard to follow for a reader accustomed in Chaucerian Middle English. For this reason in this

addressed primarily to women, concentrated on women's spirituality and morals, and discussed a multitude of temptations affecting them. The text has gained only a little attention so far in arguments concerning same-sex sexuality, but in this study it is approached as a central document in our understanding of the dimensions of women's sexuality outside the world of men in later medieval England.

Chronicles, the historical studies of their time, were addressed to both the chroniclers' contemporaries as well as to generations to come. Chroniclers looked back while leaving traces of their own time in the texts they wrote. Apart from the time of the chroniclers themselves, though, a good deal of the text in chronicles is given over to narrating and rethinking the more distant past, reaching from Genesis to stories of the unknown. Numerous works by Thomas Walsingham written at the close of the fourteenth century, whether passing notes or more complex ponderings of political contexts, become relevant in tracing considerations of same-sex sexuality. Various other chronicles also touch upon the subject, especially in the latter part of the fourteenth century. The few important traces we have of accusation letters, lamentations, speeches and pamphlets can also be found in chronicles, where some of them have survived through being rewritten or commented upon.

Later medieval English poetry, including Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, John Gower's *Confessio amantis*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and the anonymous Gawain- or Pearl-poet's *Cleanness*, have a central place as primary sources in this work.³⁸ They are collectively characterised as "Ricardian poetry," since King Richard II patronised many poets during his rule in the latter part of the fourteenth century, and, not by coincidence, poetry indeed flourished especially at that time.³⁹ Each of the aforementioned authors has gained research traditions of their own, especially in studies

study I will rely on the modern translation by White (*Ancrene Wisse* 1993), comparing the translation, when necessary, to editions of Tolkien 162 and Dobson 1972. Furthermore, I have used Bella Millett's newer translation (2009) to check (albeit unsystematically) the translation of some excerpts of *Ancrene Wisse*.

38 For *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer I am using the third edition of *The Riverside Chaucer* (Chaucer 1988); for Gower's *Confessio amantis* I am using the classic G. C. MacAulay's edition (Gower 1900), and Russell A. Peck's modern translation (Gower 1989); for Langland's text my source is Langland 1984; and for *Cleanness* by an anonymous author known as the Gawain-poet or the Pearl-poet I have used the Everyman collection *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, edited by J. J. Anderson (*Cleanness* 1996).

39 About "Ricardian poetry": Burrow 1971, *passim*; and summarised in Burrow 1982, 132-133; and Sanders 1994, 28-82.



of Middle English literature.⁴⁰ Reading many-layered and highly detailed poetry full of references to classical antiquity may leave the modern reader quite humble. Reaching the main points of the arguments of John Gower and also of the earlier but influential texts of Alan of Lille is demanding; the arguments are primarily addressed towards the most learned and the most highly educated circles of colleagues of these writers' own times. I am approaching these texts as parts of later medieval English culture, and, as such, the textual web of classical references in certain texts is seen as a tool in completing arguments addressed to sophisticated fellow readers, often with euphemisms and hidden meanings, and arguments concerning same-sex sexuality were indeed often indirect. Despite this presupposed, rather limited group of readers, these arguments are here handled both as addressed towards specific segments of later medieval English culture, yet as texts shaping part of it at large.

Dream visions, both nightmares and fantasies, were popular in medieval poetry. Dream poetry as a particular genre flourished especially during the High and Late Middle Ages, and offered its readers all the imaginable narratives of both heaven and hell.⁴¹ A significant piece of medieval English poetical handling of visiting in purgatory and hell in a dream was *The Monk of Evesham's Vision*, first written in Latin in the latter part of the twelfth century near Stratford, and then circulated and read around England until the sixteenth century. This vision, including vivid descriptions of same-sex sexual tortures and destinies in hell, was also translated into English in the late fifteenth century, and titled as *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*. Both *The Monk of Evesham's Vision* and its wider and more voluminous Middle English interpretation *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* are revealing pieces of text dealing with the very horrors associated with same-sex sexual acts.⁴² The poetry of William Dunbar, albeit a Scot rather than

40 The scholarly field is far too wide to be listed here; for the most notable example, the well-known periodical *Chaucer Review*, focusing (mostly) on later medieval English texts, Chaucer's and others, in their contexts.

41 For a now classic introduction to medieval dream poetry: Spearing 1976b; for a study stressing the central presence of dream visions in medieval poetry: Lynch 1988; for an approach interpreting medieval dreaming read from the dream poetry: Kruger 1992.

42 Modern English translation from original Latin by Gardiner 1989, 197-218: background information *ibid.*, 254-256: The vision might have served as one of the sources to Dante, and was probably circulated in England and Paris in the thirteenth century, and certainly in England throughout the fifteenth century, when it was also translated before first being printed, although the earlier Middle English translation hasn't survived: see Gardiner 1993, 138-141; thirty-three versions of the Latin prose survive in libraries, and at least forty-four copies are known to have been made, as well as translations in French, German and English; even though the Middle

an Englishman, especially his poems *Fasternis Evin in Hell*, also known as the *Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins*, a dream vision about visiting hell, and his *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, a poem built on all possible insults including several ones regarding same-sex sexual issues, is also discussed in several parts of the work at hand.⁴³

Among the literary and popular culture of the medieval England, romances were particularly popular. Romances were also numerous in later medieval England, for more than a hundred of them are known today. Nicola McDonald fittingly describes them as “pulp fictions of medieval England” that were written for their diverse and abundant audiences especially for entertainment.⁴⁴ *Amis and Amiloun*, a popular romance originating from an earlier Latin version about an admired and praised chivalric bond of friendship and love, is an essential narrative in the last part of this study.⁴⁵ Various shorter verses, both religious and more mundane, whether they take the form of mockeries defamed celebrities of the past, short rhyme on guilt, or jests, also prove to be useful. Later medieval English tales, jests, and mocking songs are few but important primary sources offering a more nuanced story of the past and its understandings than encountered in religious treatises, which is based on repetitive mutual agreements rather than bringing up the tensions and disagreements of their own time.⁴⁶

English manuscript haven't survived, there's evidence of its existence in fifteenth-century London library records: about this see *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* 2002, xx-xxi, xliii; a modern edition of the late Middle English printing edited by Robert Easting: *ibid.*; updated detailed textual and explanatory background information at length *ibid.*, xvii-c.

43 William Dunbar was a Scottish poet who wrote poetry covering varied genres from religious devotional poems to amusing insults in the end of the fifteenth century and in the very beginning of the sixteenth; I have used the editions by Mackenzie (Dunbar 1950), Scott (1966), and Kinsley (Dunbar 1979); more recent interpretative source for Dunbar's poetry is Bawcutt 1992.

44 For an updated introduction – as well as a needed polemical defence at place – of medieval English romances as indeed impassable sources from medieval English culture: McDonald 2004, 1-21, quotation from p. 1.

45 *Amis and Amiloun* was a story of friendship and among the most popular romances of Middle Ages. An early prototype in Latin, rather an imitation of a hagiography than a chivalric romance, was completed in eleventh century, yet it was rewritten and translated, apart from both Anglo-Saxon and then Middle English, to French, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian, Welsh, Dutch, German and Norse. Middle English version has survived in four manuscripts: *Amis and Amiloun* 1993, preface xiv-xvi. *Amis and Amiloun* has not been translated into modern English yet, and I have suggested some possible modern English lines for readers here when appropriate.

46 Medieval English drama, both religious and secular, is yet another potential group of primary sources. However, the mapping of the possible considerations of same-sex sexual matters from medieval English drama has not been fruitful. The survived plays as textual traces of it have proven to be little use in this study; same-sex sexuality seems not having been touched upon in later medieval English drama.



When it comes to legal documents, laws, decrees and memoranda of court cases, I am mostly relying on secondary studies, including some quantitative analyses and various case studies. These studies serve as an important group of secondary sources themselves, shedding light on many debates in past peoples' lives to be interpreted further. The actual legal sources are numerous and depict a colourful world of problems, solutions and agreements covering almost every aspect of human life.⁴⁷ Yet, against the overall usefulness of legal documents, and as studies based on them also suggests, they seem to have little more but silence to offer regarding my topic.⁴⁸ Court cases dealt with same-sex sexuality only very rarely. A remarkable exception to the silence of the courts is the case of John Rykener who apparently practised prostitution dressed and disguised as a woman named "Eleanor" for years in London, and here and there, in the late fourteenth century.⁴⁹ All in all, though, there were increasing, more numerous and more variegated number of arguments regarding same-sex sexual matters in later medieval England than ever before.⁵⁰

After the written sources, the question of pictorial material remains. The availability of pictures, carvings and such dealing with same-sex sexuality is limited. Having studied all possible pictorial material in search of jokes and the obscene, Malcolm Jones suggests an approach that would regard "art history as a branch of cultural history, not as an end in itself," and "iconography" as "cultural history with the pictures added, but with those pictures not

47 P.J.P. Goldberg 1992, esp. 28-32; and worth sharing is also his notion of record sources in general, legal sources included, which, according to him, "must appear superficially unattractive to the social historian, especially when set alongside such literary sources as the poetry of Langland or Chaucer," *ibid.*, 37. I disagree (and so does Goldberg, of course), yet I have let the various secondary sources which indicate there is not much to be found in relation to same-sex sexual matters to guide me not to work systematically with legal sources; for the lack of sources related to the topic of my study: Richards 1991, 148, and Karras 2005a, 194; for example church courts, however, may offer rather unexpected cases and also those of very explicit sexual nature, as P.J.P. Goldberg's studies on sexuality and also 'pornography' in late medieval England shows: Goldberg 1999a, Goldberg 1999b.

48 But, I will consider the question of the very lack of legal arguments in the first two main chapters considering reasons for the lack of them and the role this absence may have had in questions around silence and, in the latter part of the study, what possibilities in may have created.

49 "The Questioning of John Rykener" 1995. The original source, Corporation of London Records Office, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m. 2, is presented in two articles focusing on Rykener's case by David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras: Boyd and Karras 1995 and Boyd and Karras 1996; the document in its entirety is available at <http://Fordham.edu/halsall/source/1395rykener.html>

50 This increasing number of arguments occurred hand in hand with the increasing number of written texts in later medieval culture: Saenger 1997, 256-276.



merely as *illustrations* of that history but a constituent part of it, and a part of how we know what think we do about it.⁵¹ Michael Camille sharpens this observation and suggests that pictorial traces of medieval culture were made in relation to written ones; pictures and written words manifested past ideas and understandings by different means, yet in relation in the same culture.⁵² I agree that the world of pictures is indispensable as a group of sources for this study, yet the pictorial sources that reveal something about the late medieval English understanding of same-sex sexuality are not numerous. The most significant groups of surviving pictorial traces of medieval culture are the misericordia and illuminations in the margins of some manuscripts. Misericords, the carvings on wooden chairs in churches where monks and nuns were able to rest their knees while standing during services, are at times referred to as possible sources for pictorial representations of all varieties of mundane matters for moral purposes.⁵³

Illuminations of manuscripts have recently gained increasing attention in the field of medieval studies.⁵⁴ In a thought-provoking article about the illustrations of Brunetto Latini in an illumination in the margins of a manuscript of Dante's *Divina commedia*, Michael Camille sets his task as a medievalist in a persuasive way: "What is the meaning" of the picture "for medieval viewers of this manuscript and readers of Dante's poem?" he asks, extending his inquiry further as he considers the possible appearance of "a sodomitical body as understood in northern Italy in the third decade of the fourteenth century."⁵⁵ I wish to follow Camille's question in my effort to catch some sense of my related object of scrutiny in order to include pictorial comments in my study, and also to read a more variegated body of

51 Jones 2004, 299, his italics.

52 Camille 1998a, esp. 10, 12-13, 308.

53 The Beverley Minster collection of misericordia in south-east Yorkshire, more than ninety items, is one of the largest collections preserved from later medieval England. But, having taken pictures of all of them I did not gain direct references to same-sex sexual matters. However, some possible aspects on crossing gender boundaries appear to have been represented in these pictorial traces. In her study on English misericordia, Christa Grössinger characterises them persuasively: "Closed off from general view, behind the choir screen, the stalls with their misericords were part of the furnishing of the choir, the most sacred space of the church [...]. Yet not only was the profane subject matter the norm for misericords, but it could be shockingly obscene. [...] One of the reasons for such carvings being allowed in the sanctuary of the church is their position, low down marginal space below the 'bottom line': real bottoms – that part of the human anatomy associated with the deadliest of vices, the vilest of passions – are in contact with them": Grössinger 1997, 73.

54 Par numerous contributions to this by late Michael Camille, for an overview of this increasing field of medieval studies: McDonald 2006, esp. 5-6.

55 Camille 2001, esp. 59, 63-64.



written material. Some illuminations have also been subjected to erasure or scratching later on, as in a manuscript of the *Divina commedia* held in the British Museum, the illumination of Dante meeting his teacher Brunetto Latini in the part of hell reserved for sodomites is quite completely scratched away.⁵⁶ Indeed, English illuminations lack clear references towards thinking regarding sex between persons of the same sex, whether erased or not, yet I have tried to acknowledge even hints of such considerations. In all of their variety, these pictorial clues, however, reveal a whole world of fascination with and interests in objects less often considered in the more frequently studied written world.

Some arguments were also carved in stone. Stone friezes of warning against the horrors of unnatural sexual sins in Lincoln cathedral are famous yet rare examples of pictorial representations of the subject. They have, however, been gazed at and shared by many over the centuries since their shaping in the latter part of the twelfth century.⁵⁷ A rather different point of view opens up before us when we consider several surviving memorial brasses, some of which depict not just married couples but friends and relationships of the same sexes buried together. These are traces that ask to be considered more carefully, as according to a posthumously published study by the late Alan Bray titled *The Friend* (2003), from Oxford to a destination that was then Constantinople.⁵⁸

Throughout the study I attempt to make the most out of the primary sources that, at times, are rather few.⁵⁹ In an effort to give past arguments a room of their own, I have chosen to quote generously my sources. At times an argument may be based upon a small piece of evidence, and these significant excerpts are quoted completely in order to serve as full bases

56 For this question, including a picture of the scratched detail, see Camille 2001, 59-60.

57 Here I am especially pointing towards the apocalyptic carvings of Lincoln Cathedral representing, among other tortments, some tortures for sexual sinners, including same-sex sexual ones, as also more recently analysed by Robert Mills: Mills 2008, esp. 121-123. I will return to these pictorial warnings in section IV.4.

58 A particular memorial brass of two knights, John Clanvowe and William Neville, found in a museum in Istanbul, is one central source to which I return more closely in the final chapter of this study.

59 Some continental sources are also occasionally acknowledged in order to strengthen the approaches. Apart from various anecdotes of medieval biblical exegesis and legal statements, the notable texts include *Legenda aurea* (*The Golden Legend*) by Jacobus de Voragine, *De planctu naturae* (*The Complaint of Nature*) by Alan of Lille, and Andreas Capellanus's *De arte honeste amandi* (*The Art of Courty Love*). With some texts originally in Latin I am relying on modern English translations here. Whenever I do so I acknowledge in footnotes the particular translator and translation that I have used.

for interpretation. The danger of a book becoming partly a collection of anecdotes and fragments is near. But, in my opinion, quotations serve the reader with opportunities to follow the primary sources, interpretations accompanied. I hope that the greater variety of sources offers a greater variety of possible understandings and that the result will be a more complex and more interesting interpretation of the past, an interpretation anchored in diverse traces of the past.

3 Secondary sources: Discussing medieval sexuality

In the more traditional historical research, same-sex sexuality has often been represented in the condemnatory tradition. When Leopold von Ranke faced the matter in his conclusions on fifteenth-century Italy, he found it to be the very cause for the supposed stagnation of the Renaissance culture:

Pederasty, which extended even to the young soldiers in the army, and was regarded as venial because practiced by the Greeks and the Romans, whom all delighted to imitate, sapped all vital energy. Native and classical writers ascribed the misfortune of the nation to this evil practice. A terrible rival of pederasty was syphilis which spread through all the classes like the plague.⁶⁰

Ranke, the “father” of modern historical research and an advocate for objectivism, found the tradition of an “evil practice” to be a cause for cultural decline, as an epidemic comparable to syphilis and the plague. This is the fundamental background with which the study at hand takes issue. Yet it is the tradition of condemnatory approaches that has also been present in more modern studies of history. In the 1960s, the famous medievalist Norman Cantor saw homosexuality to have caused the decline of ancient Roman culture; he asked, “[I]s not the common practice of homosexuality a fundamental debilitating factor in any civilization where it is extensively practiced?” and reasoned that the fall of ancient Rome was attributable to similar causes as that of “another great and flourishing civilization, the medieval Arabic, where homosexuality was also widespread,” and which,

60 Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, 1494-1514*, trans. G. R. Dennis (1909), quoted and cited in Bullough and Brundage 1996a, x, discussed also in Hutcheson 2001, 99-100, 117.



due to this, “similarly underwent a sudden malaise and breakdown.”⁶¹ Even in cases when it is not blamed for the breakdown of entire cultures, same-sex sexuality has been approached as a major misfortune in an individual’s life, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie treated it in his famous study of a fourteenth-century French village, *Montaillou*, in which a fake priest named Arnaud de Verniolles appears to have been familiar with such practices in his youth, and then again in his adulthood and so, as Ladurie puts it, “the harm was done,” “a latent tendency was awakened,” and Arnaud was “doomed to become a homosexual.”⁶² Deep presumptions and negative perspectives have a tradition of their own in scholarly tradition of approaches to the matter, whether it is regarded as an “evil practice” or considered simply as “homosexuality,” itself often a condemning concept in modern Western culture.

Since Michel Foucault published the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* in 1976, discussion around sexual matters in history has expanded, and his arguments have appeared to have been the starting gun for much of the history of sexuality. Since then, a more complex, and more pleasant, path for medievalists studying the history of sexuality has been paved by James A. Brundage, Vern L. Bullough and John Boswell. Brundage and Bullough have, both together and separately, completed several volumes of historical researches on medieval sexuality. Bullough’s initial volume *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976) was followed by Bullough’s and Brundage’s collection of groundbreaking articles and then their well-known handbook.⁶³ Together with Brundage’s main monograph *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (1987), all of these studies have paved the way to more specific scrutiny on same-sex sexuality. An opening to this more specific field was Michael Goodich’s 1979 volume titled *The Unmentionable Vice*, followed by John Boswell’s two volumes (1980 and 1995) which have expanded the range of ongoing scholarly arguments beyond condemnations of the “sodomitical sin” to include approval of past same-sex love.⁶⁴

61 Quoted in Bullough and Brundage 1996a, xi; and in Hutcheson 2001, 100.

62 Le Roy Ladurie 1980, 145; discussed also in Camille 2001, 78–79.

63 Bullough and Brundage 1982; Bullough and Brundage 1996b.

64 Pioneering studies as those made by Bullough, Brundage and Boswell are, they are by no means dealt without criticism in the study at hand. Bullough’s *The Unmentionable Vice*, in my opinion, strongly (and unnecessarily) emphasises assumptions regarding premodern same-sex sexual matters as a question to have been surrounded by silence. I will take a closer look at these questions in the second chapter of my study focusing on silence and silencing. John Boswell’s two major studies have famously gained a flood of critical responses, to be noted in the following pages – and throughout this study.

In another study critical to the history of the idea of sodomy in medieval theology, Mark D. Jordan historicises the concept of sodomy that became common in the premodern Western discussions.⁶⁵ Alan Bray's *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (1982) is a pioneering part of a set of historical studies concerning premodern England in particular, and remains unique in recalling sodomy being but a part of ongoing discussions on same-sex sexual matters. Together with Bray's posthumous *The Friend* (2003), which focuses particularly on same-sex relationships outside discourses of sin, these studies serve foundational companions for my study.

There proves to be several ways of approaching sexuality in studies of medieval history. One is leaving it completely aside as, for example, in the relatively recent study *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (1994, second edition 2000), by Christopher Dyer, an established English social historian. The more than 330 pages of "everyday life" feature not a single glimpse into the sexual lives of medieval English people. Whether this topic is considered irrelevant or too sensitive a subject remains unanswered, since the silence around the matter is complete, and no reason for the omission is given. A systematic avoidance of these questions could also be faced as a major disadvantage, and I choose to take this critical standpoint.⁶⁶ Whenever faced at all, medieval sexuality has been approached at least in two distinct ways. Ruth Karras points out the two main approaches towards sexuality in medieval studies. One is that of control and repression, found repeatedly in arguments composed within an ecclesiastical milieu, in a long tradition spanning from late antiquity through the medieval period. This negative attitude towards sexuality is closely related to discourses of sin. Another view stresses the opposite, namely the lustful as joyful, the desire and pleasures as supportive of a certain playfulness. For Karras, although these views seem opposite and contradictory, both of them are true.⁶⁷ In the same vein, I argue that such contradictions are not only unavoidable but also fruitful.

65 Jordan 1997. Perhaps the major achievement in Jordan's study is the very historicising of the concept and the meaning of 'sodomy'; that it indeed was invented, and as an invention, built on the most intolerant theological arguments on same-sex sexual acts and desires there was available for thirteenth-century theologians. Jordan's argument is furthered in regarding later medieval English discussions in the first section of the first chapter in this study.

66 Medieval sexuality as an inseparable part of medieval culture is a vast field, as concluded by Ruth Mazo Karras in her volume on cultural history of medieval sexuality. Karras's book is the first monograph covering the field of history and culture of sexuality in medieval Europe: Karras 2005b; a point also emphasised by one of the pioneers of medieval sexuality Vern L. Bullough in his review of Karras's book: Bullough 2006.

67 Karras 2005b, 1-2.



The very concept of sexuality has proven to be a complicated one to deal with. The disagreement between the so-called essentialists and constructionists has impacted scholarly arguments about sexuality throughout most of the eighties, and continued to be a factor well into nineties.⁶⁸ Building on the argument for a historically malleable construction of sexuality following Foucault, Halperin rejects the concept of sexuality used in historical studies and recalls the fact that while sex has no history but sexuality has, a hundred years of it, yet not more.⁶⁹ Halperin's constructionist declaration is also embraced by a medievalist Pierre S. Payer, who, after emphasising the importance of medieval categories in medieval studies, guides his reader by simply restating that "sexuality is decidedly not one of these medieval categories."⁷⁰ A good part of the critique directed towards Boswell's works has been aimed at his relatively lax use of words "homosexual" and "gay."⁷¹ Boswell has responded to his critics by washing his hands, not just from etymologies but also from explaining the psychological or cultural grounds of sexuality, concluding that "society does not create erotic feelings but only acts on them," and he himself "was and remain[s] agnostic about the origins and etiology of human sexuality."⁷² Adding my own insistence that the focus remain on understandings in one point of time, understood through comprehensible yet not too misleading concepts from our time, I agree with Boswell.

Despite his oft-criticised usage of modern concepts, John Boswell's studies are *the* historical works that have opened up those approaches towards medieval culture that regard same-sex sexuality as a part of it. According to Boswell there might have been a history of tolerance accompanying that of a widely agreed-upon tradition of condemnation in the long course of history from Christian late antiquity to later medieval centuries.⁷³ In the

68 For a summary of this: Plummer 1992, 3-25, esp. 8; and in Kekki 2003, for essentialism, esp. 34-35, for constructionism, esp. 37-41, and for the artificial basis of them both, esp. 47.

69 Halperin 1989, esp. 257, 273.

70 Payer 1993, 15.

71 For a brief summary of these critics: Johansson and Percy 1996, 178-179; for a thorough overview the introductory chapter of the collection *Boswell Thesis*: Kuefler 2006a; and, also in the same volume: O'Brien 2006, 167-178.

72 Boswell 1990, 36.

73 Michel Foucault found Boswell's work a pioneering one, as evident in the letter he wrote to Boswell's publisher: "I receive John Boswell's work with thankfulness. I found through these proofs a very interesting matter: 'un vrai travail de pionnier' as we say over here. It makes appear unexplored phenomenons and this because of an erudition which seems infallible." This short note, a piece of rather informal text with spelling mistakes, is recalled by Carolyn Dinshaw as a

scholarly battlefield of the history of sexuality, Foucault and Boswell have been situated in the two ostensibly differing camps; just as Boswell has been criticised for his uses and abuses of today's concepts, medievalists and many other historians have criticised Foucault's loose methods with primary sources, which he consults for the mere sake of counter-argument.⁷⁴ The lack of gender-sensitivity in both Foucault and Boswell has also gained its justified critics.⁷⁵ In all, both Foucault and Boswell are referred to, followed and disagreed with in numerous scholarly arguments regarding premodern sexuality, yet they are customarily placed in contradictory camps. The main disagreement has been in approaching the very subject of sexuality and same-sex sexuality, the question of what is under scrutiny when we discuss this issue, and the problem of labelling and describing it in studies on premodern sexual matters. Acknowledging the many criticisms and disagreements that both Foucault and Boswell have garnered, in this study I will acknowledge them as "pioneers" of the history of sexuality; Foucault as helping to open the very history in history of sexuality open to debates, and Boswell for a quite remarkable widening of today's perspectives regarding the past of same-sex sexuality.

An increasing number of more recent studies have approached the Middle Ages in an endeavour of "queering" the medieval culture. The study at hand is related to queer-theoretical approaches and also to the "queering" of the past. A web of arguments accompanying my research, for example in the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, Karma Lochrie, and Robert Mills, offers queer issues up for rereading and reconsideration time and again, writer by writer, text by text. These studies offer detailed scrutiny of chosen texts combined with readings guided by the more recent theoretical approaches reading against and analysing over the normative, more traditional ways or reading and analysing the past.⁷⁶ Various nuanced and theoretically rigorous arguments continue to offer implacable guidance

memento of how members in the field of history of sexuality share similar topics and problems despite the occasional – and partly past – disagreements. The letter from Foucault praising Boswell's manuscript of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* to Douglas Mitchell, Boswell's editor in the University of Chicago Press, dated 19 November 1979, is discussed and quoted in Dinshaw 1999, 32; also briefly discussed in Kuefler 2006a, 9-10.

74 For a summary of this: Kuefler 2006a, esp. 8-12.

75 For a summary of medievalists' critics towards Foucault's theses in relation especially to gender sensitivity: Lochrie 1999, 1-2, and 12-55.

76 Among the pioneering studies are combinations *Premodern Sexualities* edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero in 1996 and *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James Schultz in 1997, followed by *Queering the Middle Ages* edited by Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger in 2001. Carolyn Dinshaw's work *Getting Medieval* (1999) has

towards interpretations of a variety of medieval English sources. In all, see no major difference between this “queering” and an historian’s critical search for past otherness, which has its own contemporary terms for dealing with sexual matters, except that the former is focused especially on the non-normative traces and interpretations.⁷⁷ The critical search for the non-normative in understandings of the sexual matters in later medieval England is at table in this study whenever possible. This approach is also actively political and in relation to critical gazes to the past and active discussions with the present. Interpretations set against the emphasised normativity in analyses are present, and possibilities behind condemnatory norms are welcomed whenever they are promising enough to be interpreted and suggested. In this study, queer theoretical approaches are present, although the focus is not primarily on them. And, the “queer moments,” “queer understandings,” and “queer desires” found in the later medieval English time and place are under the interpretative magnifying glass throughout the study whenever there appears to be “queer space” for such analyses.⁷⁸

a significant impact in this work, both due to her detailed scrutiny of a variety of later medieval English texts and to her political/personal approach.

77 Queer-theoretical approaches, increasingly present in medieval studies since the nineties, offer the term ‘queer’ to cover all the non-heteronormative sex acts, desires, practises as well as the approach to gender categories: summarised for example in Kekki 2003, 44-53, and concluded, esp. in p. 52; the ‘queer sexuality’ of later medieval England could probably be reasoned applicable an object in most parts of the work at hand, yet as I see ‘queer’ suggestively pointing towards both obscurity and variety, I refrain from employing the queer-theoretical focus in this study – yet the overall criticism of queer-theory is a significant part of my approach. As my approach is not hetero-normative but indeed quite the opposite, I seek otherness, the arguments and stories not fitting the presumed scheme, whenever they are to be found to be interpreted. This is, I suggest, comparable to Darnton’s description of the difference of the past people compared to us: “Other people are other, they don’t think the way we do. And if we want to understand their way of thinking, we should set out with the idea of capturing otherness”: Darnton 1985, 4; and about not alteration but continuities in order to be able to ask a question: Darnton 1985, 5-6. All this search may well be described as “queering” of the past and, as a result, any normative “truth” of the Middle Ages regarding sex or gender is to be rethought, and “queering” could be seen as indeed welcomed “disturbing such a sense of the past,” as Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger (2001) agreeably describe it in their introduction of *Queering the Middle Ages*, xx-xxi.

78 The term queer moment refers to previously unexpected, then observed, and then more widely shared understandings of queer, not normative, in facing sexual or gender-related matters against the norm, as discussed by Alan Sinfield regarding Oscar Wilde in nineteenth-century England: Sinfield 1994; queer understandings and queer desires for history are celebrated especially by Carolyn Dinshaw in her influential study referred throughout this study: Dinshaw 1999; for more background on queer time and temporality: Halberstam 2005, esp. 1-11.



The voices of the past are many-sided, and at times also contradictory. My task is not to exclude diversity in an effort of creating a more coherent story, but I hope all these traces have their place to speak out and represent the past's complexity and its diverse approaches towards same-sex sexuality. In all, I hope to build up interesting narratives about the approaches towards same-sex sexuality by the later medieval English; narratives based on those made by the later medieval English for themselves, and to offer some traces of the manifold understandings of same-sex sexual matters in the later medieval past of England.

