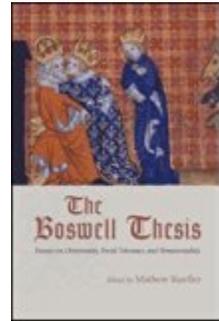


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Mathew Kuefler, ed. *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. viii + 348 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-45741-3; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-45740-6.

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Boswell Redux

In the introduction to his edited collection, Mathew Kuefler identifies four main points—Greco-Roman tolerance for same-sex relationships, the absence of hostility in Christian scripture, the lack of animosity toward homosexuality among early medieval Christians, and the emergence of hostility in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—as the core of the “Boswell Thesis.” In addition, John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (1980) [hereafter *Christianity*] defended the academic study of homosexuality, developed sexual terminology for such study, indicated that variation in the meanings of “nature” over time had to be considered, and asserted that urbanism allowed for more tolerance of sexual difference than rural society (pp. 2-3). Kuefler has organized the essays to focus on the controversy and implications of Boswell’s most famous work. A sympathetic collection, the essays nonetheless take seriously epistemological, methodological, and interpretive issues surrounding the Boswell Thesis. In so doing, the volume indicates the substantial impact of Boswell’s work on the study and interpretation of sexuality in the past.

Kuefler frames Boswell’s work in terms of the general intellectual environment and the salient controversies *Christianity* spawned. Given the wide array and range of historical studies of sexuality available now, it is easy to forget the paucity of serious work when Boswell was developing his arguments. A rare cross-over academic book, *Christianity* was widely reviewed—

and criticized—almost instantly. Kuefler summarizes several specific complaints, focusing on whether Christian tradition could be recuperated as tolerant and whether Boswell was essentialist in his understanding of gay sexuality. Noting the critiques of David Halperin, Kuefler defends Boswell’s propensity to see similarities in sexual behavior over time as more significant than differences (p. 12).[1] Boswell himself maintained that categories such as gay and straight were necessary for there to be such a thing as gay history. Boswell did indeed pave the way for gay history, although sometimes because of the aporia in his work. Through these, Boswell suggested new directions in classical scholarship, prompted feminists and women’s historians to correct for the absence of women and lack of consideration of female homosexuality, and alternately inspired and exasperated queer critics interested in sexuality and masculinity as historical constructs.

The collection takes up aspects of the areas Kuefler mapped out in three sections: “Impact,” “Debates,” and “Innovations.” Part 1, “Impacts,” opens with Ralph Hexter’s very personal reflections on working with Boswell on *Christianity*. Hexter, whose name appears in the dedication of *Christianity*, makes it plain that his is not an objective assessment. He defends Boswell by recalling that, at the time of the genesis of the project, being “out” even in academe was exceedingly risky. Hexter emphasizes that Boswell used “gay” to indicate consciousness of erotic attraction to a person’s own gender. In response to critics of Boswell’s Christian stance, Hexter notes that

Boswell did not say tolerance meant approval; just some level of acceptance, and in the medieval world, tolerance was a product in large part of inadequate mechanisms of surveillance (p. 45). Boswell was interested in imagining a better future for the Catholic Church with respect to sexuality. He felt this possible because he had revealed its more tolerant past. Hexter feels this trumps the caustic complaints of Boswell's critics.

Connections between the past and the present (and implicitly the future) are central to Carolyn Dinshaw's essay, "Touching the Past." Mining the archive of Boswell's personal papers, Dinshaw focuses on why history matters so much for gays and lesbians, for whom descent is not through biological generation. The responses in the archive and Boswell's (ultimately fruitless) negotiations with PBS to do a documentary based on *Christianity* in different ways reflect the interest in creating historical legitimacy for gay people both on Boswell's part and in the eyes of many of his readers. Dinshaw allows that Boswell did have an essentialist core in his thinking about same-sex eroticism. Boswell's vision of the past looks like urban gay male sexuality in the contemporary United States (p. 65). The male-centered quality of his study and the transhistorical emphasis on certain aspects of same-sex eroticism make Boswell seem normative, especially given the turn toward advocacy of gay marriage in recent years as the crucial goal for many gay and lesbian groups. These are legitimate criticisms and concerns, but Dinshaw draws on Roland Barthes to bring out how *Christianity* offered many readers "a touch across time" (p. 69). That is, Boswell enabled rethinking sex and sexuality because of feeling connected to the past.

The mechanisms of change are in many ways the subject of the next two essays, which address the controversy around Boswell's insistence that Christianity was tolerant of homosexuals.[2] Bernard Schlager stresses the ways that *Christianity* was very important "for its claim that Christianity is not an inherently antigay religion" (p. 75). Boswell considered himself as a "weapons-maker" and his weapon of choice was knowledge. Boswell asserted Christian tolerance in the past, reinterpreted Biblical anti-homosexuality passages, and demonstrated that the Church changed policy on issues such as incest, slavery, and usury. Boswell hoped that revealing a tolerant and flexible past would enable change. Mark D. Jordan's essay indicates that such hopes are problematic in terms of the history of theology. Boswell stressed the tolerance of on-the-ground Christianity, but Catholic theology does not necessarily respond to the grassroots.

Rather, the Church determines meaning, and papal condemnations of historical scholarship have been the norm since at least the Reformation (p. 95). Jordan clarifies Boswell's use of the term "weapons," reasoning that knowledge is to be used to fight the evil of social intolerance, rather than Christianity. As Jordan puts it, Boswell offers "a sword of truth that cuts away counterfeit Christianity" (p. 98). For Jordan, Boswell the historian made perhaps unrealistic theological claims, but Boswell the consoling figure offered many gay Catholics hope.

In a different vein, part 2, "Debates," features interpretive moves enabled by Boswell's re-imagining of Christian attitudes toward homosexuality. Amy Richlin's "Fronto+Marcus: Love, Friendship, Letters" picks up Boswell's reading of letters between orator Marcus Cornelius Fronto and the future emperor, Marcus Aurelius, for their erotic content. The standard reading of the relationship has been that, when Marcus got tired of rhetoric, he dumped his teacher, Fronto. Richlin inverts this interpretation: "that rhetoric was cast aside like an old shoe when Marcus got tired of Fronto" (p. 112). Richlin makes a strong case for the amatory content of the letters, and demonstrates the passion for words the men shared. After extensive erotic correspondence, Marcus married and told Fronto he was taking up philosophy. Marcus still wrote to Fronto, but the erotic play was gone. Fronto's attempts to engage Marcus amorously thereafter were pathetic. Richlin utilizes Boswell's insistence on eroticism between men reveal new images of sexuality in ancient Rome.

Boswell's influence on reading ancient texts is apparent in Dale B. Martin's essay on interpretations of St. Paul. Martin charges that Paul's condemnation of homosexuality do so as the result of heterosexism. Bias has led to anachronistic misunderstandings of Paul's meaning, which fail to understand Paul's ideas about the origins of idolatry and gender hierarchy. Martin does not say that Paul was tolerant, but rather, that modern interpreters reveal their own heterosexism and homophobia in their readings. Martin highlights the incoherence of arguments which simultaneously claim homosexuality is almost nonexistent and that it threatens to overwhelm heterosexual desire. Martin draws on both Boswell's modes of reading and on his practice of revealing unstated heterosexual thinking to shape his arguments.

Paul's text is well-known; the texts cited by E. Ann Matter in her essay are quite obscure. Drawing on poems from a twelfth-century manuscript from the monastery of Tegernsee, letters from a thirteenth-century Beguine,

and a Provençal troubairitz love poem, Matter reveals examples of female-female eroticism. As the surviving literature is sparse, Matter also compares the punishments for male and female homosexuality in medieval penitential literature. For most sins, women were punished less severely than men, but Matter extrapolates—using two cases from 1721 and 1619-23—to argue that women who appropriated male roles were treated more harshly. The 1721 case included capital punishment for a woman found guilty of using a dildo, and on the face of it, the case supports Matter’s argument. The gap of several hundred years, however, and the fact that the case involved a number of factors (impersonation, religious and confessional issues, multiple marriage ceremonies) indicate the need for some intervening evidence. Matter may be right, and perhaps further research will strengthen her arguments.

In contrast, the evidence seems set in the quarrel discussed by Bruce O’Brien, who examines the disagreement over whether Anselm’s passionate letters revealed friendship (R. W. Southern) or erotic attachment (Boswell). Disputing both Anselm’s sexuality and the actions that may have resulted from it, Southern and Boswell quarreled over Boswell’s interpretation of Anselm’s actions at the Westminster Council (1102). Anselm refused to enforce extreme measures against sodomites, Boswell thought, for personal reasons. Southern countered that Anselm was in no way remiss at Westminster. Southern allowed that Anselm may have had a predisposition to homosexuality in his youth. O’Brien brings out that Southern and Boswell pushed each other to give ground, although neither gave up their fundamental attitudes toward history. Moreover, despite their variant interpretations, both insisted that questions of sexual identity remain open.

Kuefler’s “Male Friendship and the Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France” historicizes the twelfth century move that at once celebrated and denigrated male intimacy. Kuefler takes on Boswell’s partial explanation for the rise of intolerance as a matter of urbanization, arguing instead that political and religious officials demonized male intimacy as sodomitical in order to emphasize obedience to authority and lineage relationships through women. State and ecclesiastical officials tamed noble military elites through tainting them with effeminacy if their obedience to seemed insufficient. Kuefler allows that his primarily literary evidence is subject to interpretation, but the range of ambivalence he documents and the ways that family and church were fore-grounded in place of male-male ties are suggestive. The links between and among expressions of hostility to

sodomy, practices of fostering, and medieval misogyny combine to make a strong circumstantial case.

Part 3, “Innovations,” opens with interpretive work on Christian texts. Mark Masterson’s “Impossible Translation: Antony and Paul the Simple in the *Historia Monachorum*” centers on reading the homosocial context of early Christian desert literature. Masterson compares the earlier Greek and later Latin texts of the *Historia Monachorum*, arguing that Paul’s obedience in the Greek text is both miraculous and replete with homosocial references. The relationship between Antony and Paul replaces Paul’s marriage, and the directives of Antony include sexual euphemisms. Masterson contends that the reader will understand Paul’s story to signal his own weakness in the face of homosexual desire (p. 221). If this seems less than obvious, Masterson supports his readings by demonstrating how the Latin version by Rufinus occludes a number of the homosocial and homosexual references. Rufinus makes Paul independent, rather than linked in dubious homosociality with Antony. Where miracles sublimate but proliferate desire in the Greek version, Rufinus’s Paul is a model for imitation in which independence and agency are deployed to curb sexual desire.

Cultural ideologies around sex as revealed in medieval contexts make up the central premises of the next pair of essays. Jeffrey A. Bowman revisits the story of Pelagius’s execution in 925 to explore sexual meaning in tenth century al-Andalus. As recounted by the Christian polemicist Raguel, the story operates within Latin hagiographic and Arabic belles lettres traditions. From the former, Raguel depicts Pelagius as the austere martyr in contrast with the lavish, sophisticated, and powerful Muslim court. From the latter, Pelagius is the typical beautiful youth celebrated in Arabic poetry and thought appropriate to the emir’s court. When Pelagius rejects the emir’s advances, he is within standard literary convention: beautiful young men are supposed to be standoffish. Bowman accordingly argues that the story is not necessarily anathematizing homosexual desire. As a reflection of cultural concerns, the story of Pelagius is about beleaguered Christians in the midst of a vibrant and seductive Islamic culture.

The cultural concern in Jacqueline Murray’s essay is castration. Boswell opened up the study of masculinity and sexuality, Murray argues making it possible to see the cultural formations around castration in terms of their broader sexual meanings. Within a Christian ethos that celebrated celibacy and applauded the decision to be

a “eunuch for God,” castration was a punishment not only for male homosexual sodomy, but also for heterosexual transgressions, including adultery, rape, and illicit relations. Castration was thought appropriate because the genitals were associated with uncontrolled sexual desire. Castration stories involve tremendous violence, but also “Excision of the testicles unsexed a man.” Penectomy symbolically destroyed a man’s humanity (pp. 265-66). Murray brings out the gendering of meanings associated with the genitals—the visible male genitals, for instance, were thought superior to internal female ones—as central to densely layered fears of castration and its attendant repercussions on status, power, and personhood.

Ruth Mazo Karras also takes up Boswell’s lead in exploring masculinity. She gently offers a crucial corrective to Boswell’s use of the term “gay” in her essay “Knight-hood, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and Sodomy.” In attacks made on the knights Templar and the Teutonic knights, Karras emphasizes that sodomy was a central charge only against the Templars, and it was meant to destroy their masculine credibility. Knights in general demonstrated masculinity through rituals of courtly love and martial prowess. Sodomy entailed the feminization of the passive partner, and thus undermined masculine self-presentation. In the highly political attacks on the Templars, sodomy was a plausible charge because they had been defeated in the Holy Land and had become a fundraising order. The Teutonic knights remained on a military footing, making attacks on their masculinity less plausible. The disgrace and dissolution of the Templars may support Boswell’s contention about the rise in hostility toward sodomy, but it also reflects highly gendered notions of masculine comportment.

Boswell pointed toward historicizing masculinity, but did not otherwise consider gender in his analysis. The final two essays privilege gender in reading for sexual content and meaning in medieval sources. Penelope D. Johnson explicates Gerardesca of Pisa’s *vita* in terms of how the thirteenth-century Pisan negotiated her spiritual life in sexual terms. Gerardesca’s desire for holiness was complicated by having been forced to marry. After convincing her husband to enter a monastery and becoming a tertiary, Gerardesca had elaborate visions. The unconventional character of some of these visions, Johnson argues, reveals Gerardesca’s fears of erotic desire, of male (sexual) violence, and of public reproof because she had been married before taking her vows. Throughout, clothing, redressing, and undressing validate Gerardesca’s spirituality. Reclothing by heavenly protectors, for instance, revises Gerardesca’s married sexual past and

remakes her body as properly chaste and holy.

Catherine M. Mooney’s “Francis of Assisi as Mother, Father, and Androgynous Figure” analyzes accounts by and about Francis in terms of their multivalent gendered imagery. Mooney acknowledges Boswell’s silence on gender, but his readings of sexuality were amenable to gender scholars. In this vein, Mooney argues that St. Francis used gendered language in his efforts to renew the Catholic Church. Francis urged the brothers of his order to take on maternal roles as material providers and guardians of spiritual solitude. Brothers should act as mothers because they provide loving service without the authority issues associated with fathers. Francis warned that women were a danger to celibacy, but only because monks let them be. Thomas Celano’s account of Francis rendered the saint in more masculine terms—as a father and warrior for the faith. But military and phallic imagery in Celano’s account is balanced by images of Francis as feminine and motherly. Mooney suggests that, in his dealings with women and with feminized prelates, and in the mix of phallic and womb imagery in the stigmata story, Francis was androgynous. Mooney contends that androgyny was integral to Francis’s attempt to revitalize the church, but it was largely effaced by the patriarchal reassertions of the Catholic Church.

While some may object that the interpretive moves enabled by Boswell’s success are empirically less than entirely satisfying, this volume offers the Boswell Thesis as an analytical tool. This has the virtue of moving past some of Boswell’s own limitations and breaking the deadlock over some of the controversies around *Christianity*. That said, none of the essays in this volume acknowledge more than in passing that Christianity as it developed into Roman Catholicism was profoundly anti-sexual. While this is well known, it seems rather important in the sense that the structure of suspicion, of intolerance, is not simply a matter of historical fact, but of ideology. Boswell both stepped outside that ideological frame and in crucial ways did not. Boswell’s idealism was both his weakness and his strength.

Notes

[1]. See especially David Halperin, “One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15-40, which is the last of several versions of this essay.

[2]. For a critical reading of Boswell and Christianity, see especially *Homosexuality, Intolerance, and Christian-*

ity: A Critical Examination of John Boswell's Work (New 1981).
York: Scholarship Committee, Gay Academic Union,

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