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*Same-Sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* is a rigorous yet warm-hearted book that provides an excellent systematic guide to a variety of possible conceptualizations of, and reactions to, same-sex sexual desire, sexual activity, and love. Tom Linkinen offers a near-comprehensive overview of what he convincingly demonstrates was “the manifoldness of later medieval [here roughly defined as 1348-1509] English considerations of same-sex sexual deeds and thoughts” (p. 8). In addition to a wide-ranging engagement with other scholars, the book is particularly valuable as a collation of primary sources relevant to this area of study. It should be highly recommended for teaching purposes and for those new to the field, and even experienced sexual historians are likely to find at least one unfamiliar reference or fresh interpretation within these pages.

As his impressive bibliography shows, Linkinen’s work builds on work by scholars who have attempted similarly compendious treatments of the subject (chief among them John Boswell, James Brundage, Vern L. Bullough, and Ruth Mazo Karras) and those who have provided usefully focused studies of smaller areas (including but not limited to Mark D. Jordan’s scrutiny of the concept of “sodomy” and Carolyn Dinshaw’s seminal application of queer theory to the medieval period).

[1] For some scholars, the definition of “sexuality” favored by Linkinen—used here to denote “the whole variety of sexual acts and desires towards and between persons belonging to the same sex”—has been controversial (p. 17). As he rightly notes, the term “homosexuality ... includes connotations of sexual identities and also communities fundamentally situated in the framework of modern, rather than medieval culture” (p. 17). “Sexuality,” I would argue, inevitably carries the residue of those inaccurate connotations. Linkinen’s argument in favor of “comprehensible yet not too misleading concepts from our time” is not quite convincing; while comprehensibility is crucial in a nonacademic context (hence the value of the LGBT History Month initiative), “not too misleading” is surely relative. Scholars familiar with
the field may well be able to transcend imperfect terminology, but this book is also a hugely valuable tool for undergraduates and other less-experienced researchers, who may be more easily misled into an assumption of equivalence between modern and medieval conceptualizations of sex.

What distinguishes Linkinen’s work is not just its synoptic nature but also its willingness to look beyond horror, condemnation, and silence as aspects of late medieval English approaches to “same-sex sexuality.” Each chapter adopts a different approach, the combination of which is conceptualized as a “sharing of understanding” within medieval culture (p. 14). This important methodology challenges the tendency to assume that medieval people held one monolithic attitude toward this issue, and foregrounds the fact that it could be, and was, viewed through multiple lenses.

Chapter 1, “Framing Condemnations: Sodomy, Sin against Nature, and Crime,” comprises a useful overview of the concept of sodomy (including a novel and challenging distinction between its “often” and “occasional” meanings), and that of “sin against nature,” followed by a summary of medieval European laws against same-sex sexual activity (or, pertinently, lack thereof). Chapter 2, “Silencing the Unmentionable Vice,” examines “both the lack of any comments on same-sex sexuality and the explicit, condemnatory silencing of the matter” (p. 11). While giving the subject of silence its due attention—and, crucially, identifying those two approaches as distinct but related practices—Linkinen argues convincingly that the current critical treatment of silence has grown stale. The conclusions he draws from his analysis of silence and silencing, particularly the definitional confusion it produced and the spaces it created for love and sex between women, demonstrate the potential for new scholarly insights once scholarship shifts from the observation of silence to its effects.

In chapter 3, “Stigmatising with Same-Sex Sexuality,” Linkinen provides an overview of the use of same-sex desire, activity, and love as “purposefully defaming processes” in relation to political and religious opponents (p. 111). Here, some readings of primary sources fail to convince. Linkinen draws inferences of “same-sex sexuality” from the fifteenth-century chronicler Thomas Burton’s use of the term “sodomitical vice” with reference to Edward II, despite having established and reiterated the ambiguity of the concept of sodomy. An argument could be made that Burton used the term “sodomitical” with that level of specificity, but Linkinen does not make it; certainly, he provides insufficient justification for his claim that Burton stated “as a fact ... that the king had sexual desires for men” (p. 256). Similarly, references to the “immoderate” love, kisses, and embraces between Edward II and Piers Gaveston in the chronicle attributed to “John de Trokelowe” do not unequivocally imply a sexual relationship, nor does the word “seducer” when used for a royal favorite (pp. 115, 123).[2] Linkinen’s work marks a refreshing departure from the frequent heteronormativity of political historians, but it is questionable whether the texts he cites support the unequivocal tone of his conclusions, or indeed whether it is prudent to make such absolute statements in an area fraught with ambiguity and semantic multiplicity.

Chapter 4, “Sharing Disgust and Fear,” explores these two instinctive or contrived responses to same-sex activity, with particular focus on the visceral revulsion expressed in the late fourteenth-century poem “Cleanness” and William Dunbar’s poem “Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins.” In relation to fear, Linkinen also considers “experiences of fear concerning a potential sin lurking inside the individual’s soul and body” (p. 150). This issue of latent potential for sin is a crucial one, and Linkinen’s work here provides valuable context for the study of same-sex activity in the early modern period, whose fear of this “potential to fall into sin” is compounded by the frequent
presentation of same-sex sexual interaction as pleasurable.

Linkinen’s final two chapters move away from engagement with acknowledged issues and into more original arguments. Chapter 5, “Sharing Laughter,” analyzes laughter as a response to “same-sex sexuality,” which he correctly identifies as frequently “yet another form of condemnation” but also “a means of releasing uneasiness concerning issues regarded as unfitting within accepted ways of life and orders of things” (p. 205). Chapter 6, “Framing Possibilities: Silences, Friendships, Deepest Love,” identifies “the non-condemnatory possibilities concerning same-sex sexuality in later medieval English culture,” though he admits that “in relation to the much-praised love of friends, there was no place for talk of sexual desires, but silence instead” (pp. 233, 234). This wide-ranging closing chapter argues convincingly for “possibilities” and “space” as created by “silence and confusion” (pp. 234, 242), particularly enabling love and sex between women, and builds on Alan Bray’s The Friend (2003) to consider shared memorial brasses and the idea of sworn brotherhood. The argument here has resonances with chapter 3’s observations on “stigmatising,” but the links are not explicitly drawn, leading perhaps to a slight misrepresentation of the evidence. For example, Linkinen notes that there was “the occasional association between the tradition of closest friendship and deviant sexuality in later medieval imagination” (p. 279), but fails to state that the examples he cites to support this point are all cases in which condemnation was politically expedient.

Linkinen’s acknowledgments describe this book as a “lengthy project,” and the amount of rigorous research it contains certainly supports this assertion (p. 312). However, perhaps inevitably, there are areas that demand yet more time than seems to have been allotted to them here. Chief among these is gender. Gender is key to Linkinen’s argument, particularly in chapter 1: “one important aspect of understanding the whole concept of sin against nature,” he argues, “was that this sin was a wrongdoing against gender boundaries and roles” (p. 75). Yet despite a nod to gender theorist Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990), the term “gender” is at no point interrogated or defined; it is unclear whether it is used as a synonym for the “sex” in “same-sex sexuality” or indicates a concept more socially determined and performative (p. 61). Butler’s phrase “gender trouble” is used not with the theoretical complexity of her work, but simply to mean “having a problem with people transgressing gender roles” (p. 251). Indeed, many of Linkinen’s assertions regarding gender are in need of “troubling.” No evidence is provided for the binary partition of gender roles,” or for the assertion that “genders were traditionally understood as essential” (pp. 64, 71). The word “effeminate,” hardly one with a straightforward relationship to same-sex sexual activity and desires, is also not defined. Troubling, too, is Linkinen’s treatment of the figure commonly known as John/Eleanor Rykener.[3] Despite his admission that court reporters’ pronouns for Rykener shift (indicating a conceptualization of shifting gender), in these pages we meet the unequivocally male “John,” or at most “John/Eleanor.” Linkinen’s quotation marks combine with his uncritical use of the word “pass” to create particular contemporary political resonances that threaten to cloud his critical argument.

Also detracting from Linkinen’s work are one factual error (the dialect of the “Pearl” manuscript is generally agreed to be that of Cheshire, not “North-East England”); several sentences in need of more careful editing to make grammatical sense; and a failure to interrogate modern English translations or to provide the reader with the opportunity (in the form of the original quotation) to do so themselves (pp. 155, 67-68). While his translation of Burton’s phrase “vitio sodomitico” as “sodomitical vice” is more accurate than the previously accepted translation (“the vice of
sodomy”), Linkinen does not acknowledge its novelty, despite the fact that (to my knowledge) he is one of the first scholars to interpret it in this way (p. 114).[4] He then accepts the scholarly consensus that translates Jean Froissart’s phrase “qu’il estoit hérites et sodomites enssi que on disoit et meysmement dou roy meysme” as “he was held to be a heretic, and guilty of unnatural practices, even with the king,” a translation I would question: could we not read “dou” as “of,” implying a different power and culpability dynamic from “with” (p. 118)?[5]

There is room, then, for expansion and complication. But within such a wide-ranging volume, there is still much of value to be found, not least in the book’s touching conclusion. “I am a historian sympathetic towards past people,” Linkinen writes, “especially those confronting sexual and gender norms; I find myself being actively ‘on their side’. In an effort to reach towards varied cultural possibilities for medieval sodomites, unnatural sinners, and all those unmentioned to have escaped condemnations, I have allowed elements of hope to have their impact on my analyses” (p. 307). As a queer historian of love and sex between men, I cannot help but empathize with this honest admission of an emotional connection to one’s field of study. Not only that, but Linkinen’s desire to move beyond condemnation has produced a more comprehensive book than we have yet seen on this subject. As he notes drily in his introduction, one way of “approaching sexuality in studies of medieval history” has frequently been “leaving it completely aside” (p. 28). If any scholars have previously chosen that path for want of a single excellent, systematic treatment of the subject, their excuse has now been lost.

Notes


[3]. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 105.


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