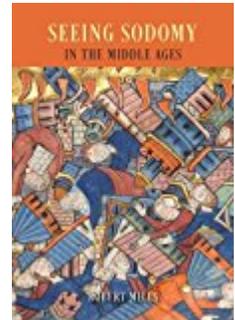


Robert Mills. *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 400 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-16912-5.



Reviewed by Kathryn Maude

Published on H-Histsex (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Katherine Harvey (Birkbeck, University of London)

In the early fifteenth century, the three de Limbourg brothers illustrated a lavish book of hours for Jean de France, Duc de Berry. This devotional manuscript includes a miniature of St. Jerome in which he is tricked into donning female attire. The saint is shown in church wearing a long, blue, figure-hugging dress, being discussed by two watching monks. It is from this image of St. Jerome that Robert Mills begins his wide-ranging discussion of sodomitical sin in the Middle Ages. Mills notes that, despite attempts to uncouple sexuality and gender in some modes of political activism, to a “twenty-first century viewer, conditioned by long-standing associations between gender-variant behaviour and sexual dissidence, it may well look as though the gossiping monks are being covertly homophobic” (p. 2). Jerome’s effeminate dress, in this reading, is a sign of his homosexuality. Through a nuanced close reading of the medieval context, Mills argues instead that the attempt to associate Jerome with the fleshly bodies of women “would have been interpreted as an attack on Jerome’s chasti-

ty” (p. 6). This kind of destabilizing analysis is typical of Mills’s impressive book, which combines theoretical insights with attentive close reading of texts, images, and material culture.

Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages focuses on high and late medieval England, France, and Italy, with occasional examples from the rest of medieval Europe. Within these parameters, Mills’s analysis extends from sculpture to manuscript illuminations, and poetry to anchoritic guidance texts. Chapter 1 focuses on *Bibles moralisées*, which are Bible texts in which the moral sense is highlighted through annotation and illustrations. Mills investigates the legibility and visibility of sodomitical vice in these texts: how and why do they depict “sodomites”?

Chapter 2 addresses the transgender possibilities of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe, and how these possibilities were embraced or avoided in medieval rewritings. Reading Hildegard’s *Scivias* (Knowings) alongside the *Ovide moralisé*, Mills demonstrates the potential of transgender as a

category of theoretical analysis “for interpreting certain medieval responses to the idea of unnatural sex” (p. 84). He proposes that thinking through the lens of transgender draws attention to the implications of cross-gendered behaviors in medieval visualizations of sodomy.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the Orpheus myth and its various permutations in the Middle Ages. Orpheus’s glance back at Eurydice, which sends her back to hell, means that he is strongly associated with the pleasures and dangers of the gaze. His loss of Eurydice leads Orpheus to turn toward men, causing Durer to label him as the “first sodomite.” In the *Ovide moralisé*, this turn toward men for pleasure is condemned but allegorically the move from the corrupt feminine to the rational masculine is figured as praiseworthy and pleasing to God. Mills then compares Orpheus to Lot’s wife, as two symbols of moral backsliding. Mills’s close reading of Orpheus in image and text troubles Heather Love’s (*Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* [2007]) and Kaja Silverman’s (*Flesh of My Flesh* [2009]) mobilization of Orpheus as a symbol of, or model for, queer history, and so ought to be particularly interesting for historians of sexuality. Mobilizations of Orpheus often ignore his sodomitical tendencies and focus on the ambivalence of his backward gaze. In the Middle Ages, Mills argues, Orpheus is not a figure of failure primarily, but functions as a symbol of praiseworthy homosocial (and misogynistic) desire. Queer scholars must be cautious, then, of using Orpheus as a symbol, as his valorization of homosocial relationships between men is potentially assimilative rather than troubling.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the sex lives of monks, that is, the sexual economy of chastity and desire. Through a close analysis of the Vézelay nave capitals, Mills demonstrates their investment in eroticism and its management. Using the figures of Eugenia, the cross-dressing female-to-male monk, and Ganymede, the boy seized by

Jupiter, Mills shows how the monks confronted anxieties about sex in the cloister head on, making a valuable intervention in debates in medieval historiography about the intimacy of relationships between men in the monastery.

The final chapter thinks through sexual orientation as it applies to the Middle Ages. Mills argues that sexuality in the Middle Ages was directional—it was oriented toward something and away from something else. He reads the *Life* of Christina of Markyate against the images of anal penetration in visions of hell to demonstrate two very different medieval sexual orientations: one toward chastity, the other toward sodomy. His work on Christina of Markyate relies heavily on previous work in the field of virginity, but comparing her orientation toward virginity with the sodomite’s orientation toward the anus provides new ways to think through medieval identity categories.

Mills outlines five themes for *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, although many more could be identified. The main theme, as the title suggests, is the relationship between sodomy and visibility in the Middle Ages, on the one hand, and “those categories we today call ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality,’ on the other” (p. 11). Setting himself against recent calls to disentangle the categories of gender and sexuality in historical research as put forward by James A. Schultz (*Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* [2006]) and David Halperin (*How to Do the History of Homosexuality* [2002]), among others, Mills emphasizes the “challenges in prizing them apart” (p. 12). Making visible sodomitical vice does not always make its significations clearer.

Mills’s second theme utilizes Annamarie Jagose’s work (*Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* [2002]) on the logics of sexual sequence (the logic that asserts, for example, the primacy of heterosexuality and the secondary nature of homosexuality) to think through the sequential categories of me-

dieval sexuality, with sex after the fall always at a remove from its ideal Edenic precursor. Throughout *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, Mills's use of theoretical work on lesbians and lesbianism alongside works of queer and gay male historiography and theory is to be commended.

The third theme Mills addresses intervenes in medieval historiography, "assessing the role friendship discourse plays in medieval visualisations of sodomy." It has become a commonplace in studies of premodern friendship that expressions of intimacy between men do not necessarily convey either "personal feeling or homoerotic attachment" (p. 16). However, Mills investigates the ways in which these friendship discourses did become implicated in anxieties about sodomitical sin.

In my eyes, Mills's most important contribution is addressed in his fourth thematic point. He makes a strong and convincing case for the importance of "gender-comparative analysis to discussions of sodomy in the Middle Ages," which is backed up by his extensive citations from both feminist scholarship and scholarship on sexuality. He is to be commended for his seamless incorporation of woman-authored and women-centered texts into his narrative of sodomitical vice, which, as he notes, "tends to be dominated by accounts of male sodomy" (p. 16). This inclusive analysis is backed up by Mills's substantial bibliography, which ranges widely across theoretical work taken from gender studies and queer theory, as well as art-historical and literary criticism.

The fifth and final theme Mills draws attention to is the ways in which sodomy's visibility "is reliant on its status as translation," that is, the ways in which sodomy functions as metaphor and as a means of negotiating difference in the Middle Ages (p. 17). Translation is important, too, in Mills's defiant and welcome embrace of the "enabling possibilities of so-called 'anachronisms' such as transgender, butch and femme, lesbian, or sexual orientation" (p. 21). While he recognizes

their limitations, his use of these terms in his analysis of the medieval source material adds depth and complexity, creating an intimacy in his dealings with the past that challenges notions of progression and linearity. This is particularly clear in chapter 2 in which he argues that the "sense of temporal disjuncture evoked by transgender in medieval contexts productively focuses attention on the politics of time that inflects the category" (p. 86).

Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages is a clear-sighted and well-written intervention into the historiography of sex and gender in the Middle Ages, which should also be of use to theorists of sexuality and gender across historical periods.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Kathryn Maude. Review of Mills, Robert. *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43352>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.