Homosexuality in High Medieval Europe: Reformist Thought and its Effects on Queer Subculture

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Abstract

Popular culture tends to trace contemporary homophobia to the church and its doctrines on unnatural sin. Indeed, a historical review of canon and its attitudes towards homosexuality paint a picture of an unfriendly landscape towards individuals who did not identify with the mainstream expectation of sexual and romantic relations. That being said, it is impossible to understand the church’s history with homophobia without looking to specific developments and understand contemporary social climates. This paper will attempt to examine the social queer subculture of the High Middle Ages and its relationship with impending changes within the church. Reform movements sought stricter adherence to laws and brought on increased dogma regarding individuals and their relationship to sin. By understanding these changes, we can attain a more comprehensive picture of what we now call homophobia during the High Middle Ages, and understand how those changes came to affect modern perceptions of same sex relations.

Keywords

History — Sexuality — High Middle Ages — Catholic Church

When asked about the source of homophobic ideology in the West, many tend to focus their scrutiny on the church, particularly the church of the Middle Ages. However, the problem with portraying the Middle Ages as an entirely homophobic landscape means there is a risk of erasing the queer1 subculture of this time, which was very much present in literature and art, as well as miss important complexities regarding the relationship society had with homosexuality. This is not to say the Middle Ages did not play its part in developing the homophobic attitudes we see today; the High Middle Ages in particular saw the growth of a reform movement to improve how the church was seen and run, enforcing stricter discipline in monastic orders and among churchmen. Sexuality became a natural target. This does not mean that queerness was completely silenced or erased, nor does it mean that homophobia was rampant and inherent in every corner of society. This paper seeks to understand the High Middle Ages and its relationship with homosexuality, and how ideas developed during this time subsequently affected the daily lives of queer men and women. Stricter laws may not automatically mean the persecution and suppression of queer subculture. Queer subculture likely would have had its own distinct history during the High Middle Ages. While it seems that canon law certainly developed a harsher stand against homosexuality during this time, which resulted in further secular disapproval of homosexuality, queer subculture as a whole both within and outside the church continued to persist.

The sources examined in this paper provide diverse views to the issue of homosexuality during the High Middle Ages. By and large, most historians deferred to in this paper seem to agree that the High Middle Ages saw the development of homophobic ideas and practices, driven primarily by religion. For instance, Louis Crompton writes in *Homosexuality and Civilization* that reform movements brought about the development of more definitive canon laws and, subsequently, authoritative views on homosexuality.² Warren Johansson and William A. Percy in Chapter Seven of the *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* elaborate on this by tying homophobia of the time with reformist attitudes against paganism and heresy,³ wherein homosexuality was equated with apostasy⁴ and caused widespread anxiety. As Michelle M. Sauer explains, this solidified the idea of homosexuality as a sin, or worse still, sacrilege: “Such crimes by clerics constituted sacrilege, because [the body] was a vessel consecrated to God.”⁵ Primary sources also paint a complex picture of perceptions of homosexuality during the High Middle Ages. Peter Damian’s *Book of Gomorrah*, written in 1081 during the height of re-

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1While writers of the High Middle Ages certainly did not use the word “queer” the way we understand it today, this is a personal choice to use an umbrella term based on current understandings of human sexuality so as to not exclude or make assumptions about individuals.


4Ibid., 172.

ligious reform in Italy, is an example of a more blatantly homophobic text. Born in Ravenna and later canonized as a saint, Damian was a reformist, Benedictine monk, and cardinal during the reign of Pope Leo IX. Damian painstakingly details the practice of homosexuality and argues philosophically and theologically as to its sinfulness. Addressing concerns over celibacy, Damian pinpoints the root of homosexuality’s evils to be lust in general, implying that repression of homosexuality during the High Middle Ages was not a singularly homophobic endeavor, but rather part of a reformist drive to eradicate all forms of sin among the clergy.

In his introduction to the Book of Gomorrah, Pierre J. Payer provides an overview of homosexuality during Damian’s lifetime, concluding that it is impossible to determine if there was an increase of homosexual activity during Damian’s time, or if Damian wrote his book as a response to the charges against Hughes of Langres, a bishop who was accused of sodomy. Both theories point to Damian as a reformist churchman railing against errant clergy. With reformist movements seeking to instill uniformity in morality and ritual, there was a fear of being deemed heretical and as such many churchmen not only tried to weed out homosexual activity, but also suppressed their own homosexual desires. In that vein, perhaps it was Damian’s reformist passions which inspired him to condemn fiercely the churchmen who thus far had not been made to answer for their indiscretions substantively. Damian justifies his disapproval of homosexuality using scripture, particularly with the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, describing lust as being a vice that “surpasses the enormity of all vices.”

According to Greenberg and Bystryn, religious interpretations of the sin of lust influenced the wider population, and contributed to negative stereotypes regarding homosexuals wherein the emerging middle class of merchants and businessmen perceived acts of sodomy among aristocrats as an expression of lust, reflecting their self-indulgent, selfish natures.

While making the same argument Damian made that homosexuality needs to be suppressed, French theologian and poet Alain de Lille’s methods of rationalizing his homophobia provide the possibility that religion may not be the sole originator of such bigotry. De Lille wrote the Plaint of Nature in the late twelfth century, attempting to deal with the question of homosexuality in rather abstract terms. With a single-minded concession to the natural order of things, de Lille argues against the theory of same-sex love by pointing out its abnormality, calling it “an outlandish and unpardonable solemicism.” What is interesting is that de Lille does not revert to Scripture for his disapproval of homosexuality; the majority of it stems from his own logical conclusions based on what would have been seen at the time as a scientific view of nature. For de Lille, a union between two individuals according to the laws of nature is meant to be “a means of procreation or as an aid to conception.” Damian also cited examples from nature to refute homosexuality, insisting that because animals do not copulate with the same sex, it is obviously unnatural for man to do so. This is what John Boswell refers to as “the ubiquity of [fanciful zoology],” which arose as a tradition during the Middle Ages wherein anecdotes about animals were used to explain and justify human morality. This would have been seen at the time as a scientific endeavor, implying that homophobia did not only come from religion. There is also the possibility that de Lille’s own misogyny played a part in his homophobic attitudes, as he argues that men and women are fundamentally separate and unequal, with the woman being the passive one in a sexual relationship while the male is active. As such, homosexuality is innately illogical and scientifically proven to be unnatural.

Homosexuality was an affront to the natural order of things, being a dangerous deviance that goes against logic and morality: “the active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex.”

There is an argument to be made that religious reforms had an effect on homosexuality itself. Greenberg and Bystryn argue that church reforms brought about an increase of same-sex sexual activity, citing proof in the variety of queer love poetry written at this time. The authors note that “[the church] gave much higher priority to ending lay investiture, simony, and clerical marriage than to the suppression of homosexuality.” Michelle M. Sauer posits that the development of situational homosexuality in particular was reliant predominantly on “enclosure,” wherein sexually frustrated churchmen would turn to fellow monks for intimacy as illicit relations between opposite sexes were more scrutinized. This later created fears that enclosure would lead to homosexuality, the idea being that idle lifestyles of churchmen and women would provide the opportunity for other sins to manifest. As monastic discipline against heterossexual affairs strengthened as a result of the reforms, it seems that an underground queer subculture grew, leading to widespread anxiety regarding the sin of sodomy. The reforms would have to answer to this so-called social phenomenon, leading to ideas such as Damian’s which called for harsh suppression. Arno Karlen also believes that queer sub-

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8Peter Damian, Book of Gomorrah, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982), 68.
9Ibid., 20-21.
10Ibid., 57.
11Ibid., 32.
12Ibid., 63.
15Ibid., 157.
16Alain, The Plaint of Nature, 158.
17Ibid., 67-68.
18Greenberg and Bystryn, “Christian Intolerance,” 537.
19Ibid., 537.
21Ibid., 148.
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culture and homosexuality increased during the High Middle Ages, but only because of increased urbanization: “Cities not only provide a wider choice of sexual partners and more opportunities for private anonymous sexual encounters, but also have enough deviants for subcultures to arise.” 22 He posits that extreme suppression of homosexual activity increased at this time due to the perception that homosexuality itself was increasing. 23

However, John Boswell disagrees that the High Middle Ages was an entirely negative experience for queer individuals by highlighting seemingly progressive incidences and ideas regarding homosexuality during this time. In Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, he presents an encouraging outlook on homosexuality in the High Middle Ages by arguing that church reforms of the time actually resulted in the development of a positive regard of homosexuality, resulting in mainstream familiarity with and acceptance of queer life and subculture. 24 According to Boswell, church reforms led to a more educated clergy, who subsequently renewed passions to scrutinize every aspect of human life, especially of the Classical world, where “gay passions and sentiments were known and studied and often respected.” 25 Indeed, Hildebert of Lavardin, himself having produced works condemning homosexuality, also wrote homoerotic poems praising the same-sex desires of classical figures such as Ganymede. 26 Boswell believes that many other churchmen came to believe in the potential benefits of homosexuality as it helped enforce celibacy from sexual relations with women and promoted spiritual love and friendship. In fact, Boswell sees the Book of Gomorrah as a telling commentary on the fact that the early church was rather indifferent on the subject of homosexuality, thereby warranting a harsh rebuke from an impassioned reformist. 27 Perhaps what Boswell perceives as the church’s negligent attitude to homosexuality allowed for gay subculture to thrive at this time, and even in wider society homosexuality was “a familiar matter of little consequence.” 28

Individuals like Damian certainly represent the more oppressive, hardline factions of society at this time, which does not necessarily represent what the dominant attitude was. Damian even describes homosexuality as being demonic and a pollution, arguing for the exclusion of homosexuals from the church or religion as a whole as to preserve the purity of everyone else. 29 However, this was certainly not replicated in reality. Even the more moderate suggestions from Damian’s work were not fully adopted by Pope Leo IX, who politely agreed with Damian’s reasoning but never officiated the full-scale oppression he called for, instead suggesting more humane action in accordance with “divine mercy.” 30 In this vein, an example of a more moderate take on homosexuality can be found in the existence of same-sex unions in Europe. In Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe, Boswell claims that the practice of brother-making or brotherly love allowed for two people of the same sex to be joined in marriage, further arguing against the idea that these marriages were simply business contracts as almost every aspect of the union is identical to that of a heterosexual marriage. 31 Documents from Spain cited by Boswell present contracts of same-sex unions that are similar to heterosexual unions, being “based more on affection and understanding than contractual commercial agreements.” 32 It is possible that such practices provided a vehicle for civil unions between people of the same sex. Indeed, some primary source evidence, particularly poetry, seems to suggest that the situation for queer individuals during the High Middle Ages was not as bleak as many people today imagine they were.

Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship contain a plethora of poetry both explicitly and implicitly homoerotic, painting a landscape of the High Middle Ages in which increased repression did not mean the eradication of gay subculture, but rather its growth. Some of these poems positively feature homosexuality, such as the depiction of the correspondence between two nuns suggesting a permanent sexual and romantic relationship. 33 In the introduction to compilation of poems, the editor Thomas Stehling provides insight into the perception of homosexuality in society at the time in terms of how it was viewed as a sin. Apparently, homosexuality was a common sin lacking the gravity of murder or incest, ranking with gluttony or drunkenness and other “sins of excess... anyone could commit.” 34 In other words, its severity as a sin was negligible. It is important to note that the popularity of this perception changes with time. Stehling also identifies conflicting attitudes toward homosexuality as expressed in the poetry he compiled. He draws on the example of Marbod of Rennes, a churchman and poet whose poetry written during the late eleventh century and early twelfth century “suggest[s] changes in his attitude as he grew older” towards being more frank regarding his attraction to the same sex. 35 Anonymous marginalia from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries found in

23 Ibid., 53.
24 Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, 235.
26 Poem number 67 in Medieval Latin Poems of Male Love and Friendship describe Ganymede as the concubine of Jupiter, who “declared that all things shall be permitted with boys” and takes Ganymede the heavens where he can give “Jove kisses by night and wine by day.”
27 Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, 209.
28 Ibid., 235.
29 Damian, Book of Gomorrah, 59.
30 Ibid., 96.
32 Ibid., 257.
33 Poems number 112 and 113 taken from Medieval Latin Poems are sourced from a 12th or 13th century German manuscript and depict two women referring to each other as “lover” and making declarations such as loving one another with “soul and body” and “When I remember the kisses you gave me, the way you refreshed my little breasts with sweet words...”
Stehling, Medieval Latin Poems, 101-103.
34 Ibid., xx.
35 Ibid., xxiv.
a manuscript with earlier poems from the ninth century “accuse the earlier poems’ authors of hypocritically concealing their own [homosexual] predilections.”

Epigrams 109 and 110 are particularly telling with the former preaching: “You will find many who say that wickedness with boys should be cursed, but they do not shrink from the deeds,” and the latter stating: “Many, to hide what they love and freely do, curse with their words what they wallow in with their deeds.”

A collection of poems by Hilary the Englishman in particular give the impression of how queer men could be open with their strong feelings of romance. Hilary’s poems do not deal in subtext; he is rather explicit with his feelings:

Believe me, if the ancient times of Jove were to come again,
Ganymede would no longer be Jove’s maid,
But you, ravished in the heavens, would give Jove
Pleasing cups by day, and even more pleasing
kisses by night.

(Hilary the Englishman, “To an English Boy”)

Boswell says the existence of a substantial number of queer churchmen and laymen, both of whom produced works in gay literature, is proof enough that homosexuality was not as reviled as Peter Damian makes it seem. In fact, Boswell insists that even the writings of decidedly heterosexual individuals like the satirist Walther of Chatillon were not negative. Walther’s most severe rebuke of homosexuality is rather casual: “he pictured God as simply ‘laughing at’ clerics guilty of [homosexuality].”

The increased reformist drive for uniform discipline in Christianity had a number of effects, but most importantly, the reforms brought on the fierce scrutiny of the private, and thus churchmen were expected to be perfectly moral both outwardly and inwardly. Having a lack in one area of monastic morality meant unfitness to be in the clergy, and subsequently implied one’s inferior faith. At the same time, the conditions enforced by the reforms may have also caused queer subculture to flourish. Strict celibacy and segregation of the sexes may have created the perfect environment for situational homosexuality, but also for queer subculture to flourish in secret. Education of the clergy and their consequent high levels of literacy meant even heterosexual individuals were aware of queer subculture and could have seen positive aspects of homosexuality not just through an admiration of the classics, but also with respect to reformist values of separation from the opposite sex. Due to these reasons, it appears that queer subculture not only persisted but even thrived during this time. The frequency of poetry expressing same-sex love with frankness and lack of shame took off in the twelfth century, denoting a flourishing subculture. Apparently, while developments during the High Middle Ages certainly played a part in enabling homophobia for centuries to come, these same developments also had a role in shaping queer subculture and consequently, queer pride.

Bibliography


