

Visualizing Female Sexuality in Medieval Cultures

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This issue of *Different Visions* dedicated to the visual representations of female sexuality in medieval cultures originated in a conference session at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2010.¹ The difficulties inherent in the project were made manifest when one of the contributors, Sarah Salih, betrayed discomfort on a theoretical level with the premise of the session that led her to conclude “that there is no such category as female sexuality in Western medieval art,” an argument that I have asked her to revisit for this volume. But even accepting the premise, the topic presents problems, such as recovering knowledge about what was intensely personal and often intentionally hidden, and trying to discover something about subjectivity in the visual realm when the very act of representation objectifies people, both literally and figuratively.² As cultural historians we differ about the extent to which this is possible, and about the proper methods for approaching such endeavors.

The obstacles to recovering women’s history are well known, especially in medieval societies, where the male clerical voice predominates in the record. Even when we do encounter a Hildegard of Bingen, Heloise, Christine de Pizan or

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Margery Kempe, we are aware that their voices only come to us filtered through patriarchal structures.³ It is evident that medieval women themselves were aware of the limitations and dangers of participating in male-dominated and frequently misogynist discourses, and this adds another layer of interpretive complexity. A number of scholars have attempted to read into, through and around the ideological obstacles built into contemporaneous writings by and about medieval women, or into the artistic products that they made or patronized, in order to recover, however imperfectly, female social identities and individual subjectivities.⁴ There is far less work about medieval women that directly addresses female sexuality, in spite of increased scholarly attention to medieval sexuality in general. Much of the scholarship that tries to recuperate formerly submerged medieval sexualities has been done by queer theorists who have focused on relations between men, especially the ambiguities and possibilities surrounding the medieval use of the term “sodomy.”⁵ As Karma Lochrie points out, the result has been that female sexuality in the Middle Ages remains largely invisible.⁶ This lacuna, I argue, distorts the historical record and haunts our own conflicted understanding of the vital role that both gender and sexuality play in the organization of societies and the lives of individuals in the Middle Ages and today.

Historical work that challenges fundamentalist and transhistorical notions about female sexuality is urgently needed in order to counter universalizing presumptions that continue to disempower and harm women. For example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (previously the Supreme Sacred

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Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition) recently decided to censure *Just Love: a Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* by Sister Margaret Farley, because it “manifests a defective understanding of the objective nature of the natural moral law.”⁷ It dismisses Farley’s gentle and humane meditations on how to reconcile love and justice as antithetical to Catholic theology because, among other things, she questions that divorce and remarriage should be forbidden whatever the circumstances; that homosexual acts are “acts of grave depravity;” and that masturbation is “an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.”⁸ On the basis of gender alone, the Church does not allow Farley or any woman to be part of the hierarchy that is empowered to rule on these and related issues that profoundly affect the lives of millions of Catholic women. Pope Francis I has recently confirmed gender-based inequities in the church, reinforcing the ban on female priests and upholding his predecessor’s censure of American nuns for “promoting radical feminist themes.”⁹ Women are similarly disenfranchised in Evangelical Christian churches, orthodox Jewish *yeshivas* and Islamic *madhahib* that claim authority from fundamentalist precepts and precedents. By showing that hegemonic judgments about gender and sexuality are historically contingent rather than universal extensions of “natural moral law,” historians can productively intervene in consequential debates that shape the lives of modern women.

The Catholic hierarchy’s attempt to undermine and suppress Sister Farley’s alternative theology regarding sexuality reminds us that sexuality in our own moment—whether hetero- or homosexuality, male, female or

transgendered—is disputed, complicated and intertwined with other cultural factors and identities. Since we are starting from a point of uncertainty, Karma Lochrie reminds us that we need to bring to our investigations a level of “epistemological humility,” and she suggests that we engage in a model of “perverse presentism,” which is the name that Judith Halberstam gives to applying “what we do not know in the present to what we cannot know about the past.”¹⁰ Medievalists have long criticized the tendency to use the medieval as a foil for the modern, and have been engaged, like Ruth Mazo Karras, in correcting the claim that the Middle Ages are “so different from the modern era as to invalidate any comparisons or any relevance.”¹¹ Especially because of the taboos and anxiety generated in the arena of female sexuality, we need to consider the widest array of possible source materials, including the visual, which relatively few studies have exploited. A fresh look at the Middle Ages discredits assumptions of transhistorical sexualities and offers possibilities of alternative sexual or erotic desires, practices, and identities that may help us use what we cannot know about the past to understand better what we do not know about the present.

Recent scholars of medieval sexuality are questioning some of what to many are *a priori* premises. For example, Karma Lochrie argues that we cannot assume that the Middle Ages were heteronormative.¹² Heteronormativity, she maintains, was not possible until after nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexologists applied statistical methods to sexual behavior and created the concept of norms that were not explicitly based in religious and moral prescriptions, and

which could be addressed in terms of binaries such as heterosexuality/homosexuality, normal/deviant, and natural/unnatural. It is not necessarily appropriate to apply these “norms,” which also shaped expectations and lived realities, to medieval sexualities. As Thomas Laqueur has pointed out, the pervasiveness of the Aristotelian one-sex model in the Middle Ages calls into question a strict conceptual divide between male and female.¹³ James Schultz comes to the conclusion that in courtly love narratives, “bodies were not given a sexually specific morphology,” but were distinguished in texts according to gender and class by devices such as the depth of rhetorical description and the nature of viewer responses.¹⁴ According to Schultz, desire in medieval texts cannot be categorized as heterosexual.¹⁵ Carolyn Walker Bynum’s work both on the feminized Jesus and soteriological theology has made it clear that widespread beliefs and devotional practices blurred the line between male and female.¹⁶ Certainly Judith Butler’s influential hypothesis that gender is performed on a socially constructed continuum must inform historical treatments of sexuality.¹⁷ If sex does not equal gender, notions of sexuality and gender and other aspects of individual and collective identities are nevertheless intertwined in pre-modern societies; their changing constellation is contingent on specific historical circumstances.¹⁸ Though the work of Lochrie, Schulz and others should make us worry about misleadingly validating a foundational notion of “female sexuality,” we must also be wary of universalizing a gender-neutral notion of sexuality that, given the nature of medieval sources, still privileges a history of sexuality described by and experienced by those gendered male in medieval society.

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There is a liberatory aspect to the operation of discovering in the Middle Ages “new configurations and affiliations of sexuality that are currently unavailable to a culture gripped by the heteronormative/perverse polarity,” as Karma Lochri puts it, even though she is quick to acknowledge that “the preheteronormative Middle Ages was not without its gender prejudices.”¹⁹ Indeed, we must guard against the danger of romanticizing medieval sexualities as part of our reaction to the perception that the binaries dominating our own social and political discourse about sexuality misrepresent human experience in a way that is restrictive, repressive and unjust. If medieval people were not always bound by rigid concepts of male and female, half of the population was still gendered female in ways that were misogynistic, demeaning and injurious.

Images represent a potentially rich source for interrogating the issue, especially given that, like sermons, they often operated as a point of contact between the clerical hierarchy and the laity and female religious. By the later Middle Ages images were increasingly produced by lay artisans for a lay public. Even though images typically projected official or “normative” viewpoints, the ambiguous and multivalent nature of the visual could allow or even encourage (whether deliberately or inadvertently) unconventional or even subversive readings. They can give us access to the elusive “meanwhile” that Homi Bhabha shows coexists with dominant narratives.²⁰ And yet, the majority of the scholarship on medieval sexuality relies almost exclusively on textual sources.²¹ The few general volumes that collect illustrations of medieval objects relevant to the subjects of love, desire and sex do not substantively address the relationship

between images and female sexual subjectivity.²² The art historical studies that have breached this topic suggest that it is a rewarding vein to mine.

One of the most intriguing and influential studies about the sexual pleasures and anxieties that images might engender for medieval viewers, both male and female, is by Richard Trexler, who showed that even crucifixes, “the fetish of a decisively patriarchal ecclesiastical structure . . . attain their full meaning only when we know something about the devotees, and perhaps most fundamentally, their sex.”²³ Though Trexler raises the question of female sexual responses to the crucifix (and the concern of church authorities about this), his article deals primarily with potential male responses, especially since, “over the course of Christian history, mostly only males’ reactions to an eventually palpable Christic penis are found to be worthy of analysis.”²⁴ Another potential visual source for discovering more about female sexuality in the Middle Ages is the wealth of material known to have been used in female devotional practices in which affective and sexual responses seem to overlap, mostly neglected by art historians until Jeffrey Hamburger conducted substantive studies of it.²⁵ He credits nuns with establishing “a benchmark for the lay spirituality of the later Middle Ages,” and for “championing art as a vehicle for devotional experience.”²⁶ He resists, though, the notion that their devotional objects might offer a radical understanding into the subjectivities or the sexuality of the women he studies. Instead, Hamburger writes eloquently of the way the images may have functioned in allowing the nuns to fulfill their hunger for greater access to the Eucharist.²⁷ For him, these images only satiate officially sanctioned desires. He argues that

“medieval nuns developed their distinctive visual culture within constraints that severely limited their agency.”²⁸ He dismisses the psycho-analytic explanation of sublimation for female piety as being reductive, and does not acknowledge other possible interpretive models to address the entanglement of female piety and sexuality.²⁹ Hamburger goes so far as to aver that “to oppose a quintessentially female subjectivity to the objectifications of misogyny runs the risk of defining the difference between male and female in terms of a gendered distinction between body and soul.”³⁰ In other words, by focusing on the sexuality of medieval women in a devotional context, we fail to appreciate their capacity for spirituality, perhaps even inadvertently endorsing medieval, misogynist views that associate the feminine with the material (body) and the masculine with the spirit (soul). But segregating the spiritual from the sexual in our understanding of female piety in the Middle Ages creates alternative dangers, such as anachronistically projecting a Cartesian mind/body split onto medieval subjects. At worst, it can even seem to reinforce the medieval denigration of female embodiment by echoing the Pauline position that women’s bodies are incompatible with true spirituality, that their “weaker vessels” justify the subordination of women in human societies (e.g. Galatians 3:28; I, Cor. 11:3-16; Peter 3:1-7).³¹

Hamburger’s reluctance to consider the implications of female sexuality for the images he studies—and vice versa—is in keeping with Carolyn Walker Bynum’s argument that a preoccupation with sexuality is a modern one that scholars apply anachronistically to the Middle Ages. Bynum maintains that sex was not the primary association that medieval people brought to the body, and

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that they were far more concerned with issues of food, suffering and the promise of resurrection.³² As Pierre Payer points out, since sexuality is a modern category of analysis, any attempt to propose a medieval theory of human sexuality “would be a modern theory about the Middle Ages, not a medieval theory discovered by a modern.”³³ And indeed, the whole historical enterprise is a complex dialogue between our theories and our discoveries, our current concerns and historical alterity.³⁴ As much as it is important to avoid anachronism, it is also essential—and not necessarily essentialist—to acknowledge similarities in the experience of being human that occur across time and space. There is much to be learned about applying modern categories to the past—as long as we are self-conscious about what we are doing—as Joan Scott has so effectively established in her influential essay about gender “as a useful category of historical analysis.”³⁵

Although there is an increasingly large corpus of scholarship that studies representations of women in medieval art, “queer” responses to medieval art, and female patronage of medieval art, there are few addressing the role images may have played in constructing the sexual attitudes or in defining the sexual agency of medieval women.³⁶ One pioneering study is by Madeline Caviness on the Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux, in which she proposed that the sexualized content in the margin of the queen’s tiny wedding present may have intimidated the young girl—whose nuptials to an older relative may have been a fearful or distasteful prospect for her.³⁷ This interpretation opposed the traditional admiration of the book’s sophisticated style and witty drolleries. The subsequent controversy about Caviness’s interpretation leads us to ask which is more distorting: to ignore the

sexual feelings, attitudes and experiences of medieval women in the absence of explicit sources, or to use our historical imagination to reconstruct them for particular women at particular moments in their lives as suggested by the sources that we do have?³⁸

Since sexual desire is both historically contingent and idiosyncratic to individuals, how to identify whether an image is charged with sexual or “erotic” connotations is a vexed topic.³⁹ In our own era, the rise of technology-enabled sex (phone sex, cybersex) makes us reconsider the long-held assumption that “sex” requires physical contact—allowing us new insight into the “chaste erotics” or “sex without sex” explored in a special issue of the *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* edited by Sally Vaughn and Christina Christoforatu.⁴⁰ And what is to be interpreted as “erotic” is not necessarily self-evident. Sarah Salih notes that genitalia-themed images that may titillate modern viewers seemed designed to have “anti-erotic impact” in the Middle Ages, and suggests that the suffering body of Christ—surely an erotic taboo for modern viewers—as the “primary erotic image of the middle ages.”⁴¹ Sarit Shalev Eyni and Elina Gertsman both offer studies in this volume that examine differing strategies for picturing the sanctification of female sexuality. In her essay, “Was It Good for You Too? Medieval Erotic Art and its Audiences,” Martha Easton favors the term “erotic” over its corollaries, “pornographic,” or “obscene,” in order to allow a space for less judgmental assessments of what might appear to us be sexually themed images—a space that medieval misogynistic and modern puritanical discourses often foreclose.⁴²

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An exemplary study by Susan L. Smith demonstrates how a group of ivory mirror cases may have functioned for privileged women in negotiating their sexual identities in a patriarchal culture.⁴³ Often gifts from men, they typically codified female sexual submission by representing female lovers as responsive to male gazes, encouraging female viewers to “see themselves as they were seen by men and to subordinate their own looking to the demands of male heterosexual desire.”⁴⁴ At the same time, they offered a context, for aristocratic women at least, to contemplate pleasurable sexual activity outside of the largely condemnatory discourse of church authorities, and they encouraged self-consciousness about being “one who looks”—in contrast to the looked-at-ness inherent in the modest, lowered eyes recommended by contemporaneous moralists.⁴⁵ The fluid dynamic of gender, sexuality, and power captured by these objects is further evident in certain exceptional mirror backs in which women are depicted dominating the sexually charged encounter—sometimes even gazing assertively out at the viewer.⁴⁶ Other categories of imagery offer similarly rich interpretive rewards.

One of these is the representation of sexual violence. In her groundbreaking work, Diane Wolfthal shows us that medieval images of rape—from biblical illustration to legal textbooks—reveal medieval attitudes towards sexual violence that were complex and wide-ranging. Images could aestheticize the act to minimize the crime and titillate male viewers; they could convey empathy for the victim or present rape narratives in ways that blame the woman, implicitly or explicitly generalizing about the putative threat of female sexuality.⁴⁷

Wolfthal's examination of Christine de Pizan's treatment of rape in her works offers insight into how a late medieval woman interpreted and internalized the complexities of the issue.⁴⁸ Martha Easton also addresses the issue of sexual violence against medieval women by examining images of martyrdom that seem to sexualize the suffering of female saints in ways that are not ostensibly called for in their legends.⁴⁹ The images, she points out, frequently use visual strategies to maximize the possibility for both male and female viewers to empathize with the suffering saint, which had the effect of exonerating the sadomasochistic pleasure that the images might engender in them. As was the case with the mirror cases, the martyrdom images operated in potentially contradictory ways. They may have encouraged women to suffer passively, like the saints, but they also evoked the familiar end of the story in which the woman triumphs over her torturers and joins the company of saints in heaven.⁵⁰ In the case of St. Agatha, Easton argues, female viewers could associate the saint's breast with Christ's side-wound—an operation facilitated by the fact that Christ's-wound-as-breast was a common theological trope—and thus identify with a sexualized female body that was also sanctified. Indeed, the isolated images of the side wound look strikingly vaginal, and may have worked for female viewers in a similar way.⁵¹

In fact, breasts have proved puzzling for medieval interpreters and their modern counterparts. Carolyn Walker Bynum and Margaret Miles both maintain that in the Middle Ages the breast was primarily a signifier for nourishment, both material and spiritual, and that its sexual connotations are post-medieval.⁵²

Sarah Salih has called this into question, remarking that Bynum's argument is “a

sophisticated reinterpretation of an older claim that medieval people were simply less interested in sex than we are—a claim which asserts a far more radical alterity of sex and human personality than that found by self-avowed social constructionists.”⁵³ Salih explores textual examples in which medieval confusion and anxieties about distinguishing between the erotic and the spiritual come to the fore. For example, hagiographers retrospectively reassured St. Gilbert of Sempringham that his dream of touching a young woman’s bosom did not compromise his purity by recasting it a symbol of the peace of the church, and the to-be-beatified Christina of Markyate worried that the “stings of flesh” that troubled her when she envisioned holding Christ to her own bosom may not have left her virginity “unscathed.”⁵⁴ Once we allow that breasts in the Middle Ages could have sexual connotations, it opens up new possibilities for interpreting responses to the human figure in medieval art, whether sanctioned or transgressive.

Christine of Markyate’s misgivings remind us that the notion of virginity is unexpectedly fungible, and that virginity was a key aspect of the literal and figurative sexual economies of the Middle Ages. It could underscore or undermine gender categories, shifting as a signifier across chronological and geographical boundaries as it applied to physical or hypothetical states, to a life stage or permanent status, to women and men, to nobles, saints and commoners, to unmarried, married, widowed, clerical or secular persons.⁵⁵ In spite of the fact that we are lacking a synthetic overview of the visual material, a number of insightful art historical case studies indicate that visual imagery has much to tell

us. The Virgin Mary's bosom, for example, features prominently in the debate on the meaning of the medieval breast mentioned above, embodying, as it does, contradictory tensions between sexuality and purity that characterized (not only) medieval cultures. Cynthia Hahn, Barbara Newman, and Pamela Sheingorn have all discussed the ways in which images addressing the Virgin's marriage to Joseph—who was divinely selected to be miraculously cuckolded—triggered comparable anxieties.⁵⁶ Elsewhere I have noted that Mary's body was a dominant symbol, and that she absorbed into her "meaning-content most aspects of human social life."⁵⁷ As a result, images of her are ubiquitous in medieval culture, and unraveling the ways in which they show how virginity intersected with medieval sexuality is a daunting task that remains to be done.

Mary is not the only iconographic motif that promises insight into medieval virginites. Images of the ancient Jewish heroine Susanna appear to have been enmeshed in negotiating the thorny theological debates about the status of virgins and lay married people in the church—clarifying arguments about conjugal sex and conceptualizing marital chastity as an alternative, as Katherine Smith has shown.⁵⁸ Mati Mayer's analysis in this volume of images of Susanna and Bathsheba bathing demonstrates how such figures operated in other theological discourses. Representations of St. Wilgefortis, who miraculously grew a beard in order to escape an unwanted husband, demonstrate the ways that virginity could blur the lines between masculine and feminine and confuse sexual expectations.⁵⁹ Even sheela-na-gigs, sculptures of monstrous females exhibiting outsized genitals, may have operated in discourses about purity, as argued by

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Juliette Dor.⁶⁰ Marion Bleeke puts forward another interpretation of sheela-na-gigs in this volume and elsewhere that also departs from the standard explanation for them as a projection of the church's condemnation of female sexuality.⁶¹

More and more, scholarship is exposing a diverse, nuanced and confusing picture of the sexual landscape that medieval women inhabited. This emerging portrait belies commonly held generalizations about monolithic nature of misogyny and repression in the Middle Ages comparable to the diverse, nuanced and confusing sexual panorama in which modern women find themselves. *In and Out of the Marriage Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe*, Diane Wolfthal's expansive analysis of images of sexuality in the early modern era, incorporates late medieval imagery as well as discussion of earlier medieval attitudes. Her treatment of sexuality in reference to spatial contexts—bedrooms, windows, baths, brothels, streets—helps us to see the connections between the literal and social structures of sexuality, between theoretical and material constructions. We still lack this sort of art historical synthesis for the earlier period, but the increasing number of case studies to which this volume contributes lays the groundwork for similarly ambitious projects.

Mati Meyer offers a study that shows how images of nude women defined spaces gendered male, how even the male religious who often are the source of the most conservative and even misogynist views in the Middle Ages, made room to construe female sexuality in an unexpectedly positive light. She examines images of female bathers that circulated in the cloistered male environment of a

Greek monastery, possibly in Rome, and argues that sexualized images of women helped construe a communal identity within a group of Byzantine monks emerging from a troubled period—the iconoclasm. Even more surprising, this was accomplished with reference to exegetical texts that allowed them to attribute positive theological meanings to sensually rendered female nudes. In some cases, female and male characteristics were elided, creating a “third gender,” perhaps to diminish the erotic impact of the representations of sexualized female bodies. Meyer considers how feminist theories about the gaze can be employed to better understand these maneuvers, which enabled the monks to freely contemplate such representations while congratulating themselves for having the virtue to approach them in what they considered a proper frame of mind.

Marian Bleeke demonstrates that the explicit representations of female genitalia that characterize sheela-na-gigs could also have unexpected connotations in varying viewing contexts. Sheela-na-gigs on secular buildings such as tower-house castles, she argues, must be analyzed apart from the ones located on church architecture. Bleeke parses the tensions that arose when the Anglo-Normans tried to reform Irish marriage customs that permitted endogamy, polygamy, and “visiting unions,” all sexual arrangements less formal than marriage but still recognized by law. The resulting confusion over what constituted legitimate marriage created havoc in the realm of title transfer and inheritance rights, which led to the proliferation of defensive keeps, whose fortified gates came to be adorned with sheela-na-gigs. There, the apotropaic

power attributed to these exhibiting figures functioned as a defensive mechanism, even while their gaping genitals evoked the reproductive power of women, through which inheritances were handed down or lost.

Sarit Shalev-Eyni also considers how female sexuality signified on the borders: in this case the demarcated but nevertheless permeable boundary between Jewish and Christian communities in fifteenth-century Germany. She examines how images in Hebrew manuscripts convey a heterogeneous but still particularly Jewish perspective on female sexuality. They emphasized ritual bathing that sanctified conjugal relations and enabled female sexuality an accepted role in the public domain, even while betraying anxiety about female sexual power. Though there was some overlap in attitudes between the Jewish and the dominant Christian cultures, the Jewish images illustrate self-conscious attempts to oppose Jewish values about sexuality—especially the elevation of sex in marriage—against Christian values of virginity and celibacy. Shalev-Eyni shows how this ideological stance came to be symbolized in images of the breast, which could stand at once for sensuality in marriage and the sanctioned motherhood that was to result from it. Breast imagery thus participated in an internal negotiation about the relationship between female sexuality and Jewish identity; it expressed ideas about community and identity that were inflected by the experience of being a minority living within a dominant Christian culture.

Elina Gertsman's study of the Pühavaimu Altarpiece in Reval demonstrates a way in which female sexuality could be sanctified in a Christian context. The narrative of the life of St. Elizabeth of Thuringia illustrated on this

altarpiece treats a story in which the saint tends to a leper whom she invited into her marital bed. Since leprosy was considered God's punishment for sexual sin, and lepers were seen as morally corrupt, lecherous and contagious, Elizabeth's act was transgressive. This was confirmed by the way that her mother-in-law and husband are shown rushing to the scandalous scene. But what Elizabeth's husband sees in the bed instead of the leper is Christ pictured as a miniaturized sexualized crucifix. Gertsman analyses the implications of this surprising illustration of Elizabeth's disquieting desire with reference to the other panels of the altarpiece and its function in comforting the sick. In doing so, she illuminates the tensions between what was perceived as transgressive female desire, and the possible methods and potential rewards of its legitimization.

The studies in this volume encourage us to reflect on the issues at stake in investigating female sexuality as it was constructed in both secular and sacred contexts. They draw attention to the complexities of defining categories and envisioning responses across different visual media, across centuries and cultures, and they address the way attitudes towards sexuality inflect and are inflected by intercultural encounters among Latin Christianity, Judaism, and Byzantium. It is true, as Sarah Salih points out in her wise cautionary comments about the "Trouble with Female Sexuality" included in this volume, that "female sexuality" addressed in images functioned in constructing the sexuality of both men and women, and that "there is no coherent package of desires, behaviors and relations that belongs to female subjects."⁶² The enterprise at the heart of this volume is not to recover and tally the private sexual longings, practices or

identities of female subjects in the Middle Ages—which is impossible, and it is certainly not to reinforce a simplistic male/female binary through the lens of sexuality. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the manner and degree to which sexuality is permitted, suppressed, restricted or circumscribed are culturally determined, and to seek greater understanding of this operation by analyzing how female sexuality was expressed and enacted through imagery. Because there were human beings in the Middle Ages who were gendered female—who had different legal and social status and were subject to different cultural expectations because they were gendered female—it seems likely that a representation of a walking vulva on a personal badge, for example, had an entirely different charge than a walking penis, and it must have prompted varying responses contingent on the gender of the viewer of the badge (e.g. fig. 7 in Salih, “Trouble with Female Sexuality”). Each case study offers diverse opportunities for discerning the implications of such differences. When we study the socially constructed images that addressed female sexuality, we can perceive the all-important lacunae and negative spaces that gave rise to them. This is not recuperation, but it is recuperative nonetheless. In the papers of this volume, the authors discover how the images of our pre-modern past provided a space in which viewers could negotiate the confusing, discomfiting and contradictory cultural messages that accrued around sexuality in general, and female sexuality in particular.

¹ The session, entitled “Representing the Sexuality of Women in Medieval Europe and Byzantium,” was sponsored by the International Center for Medieval Art and co-organized by Sherry C.M. Lindquist and Mati Meyer.

² See the discussion in my introduction to *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, ed. Sherry C.M. Lindquist (Farnham, UK, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 1-46, esp. 3-9.

³ *La vie sainte Audrée* by Marie (de France?) is a rare example in which a woman constructed the sexuality of another woman, see Virginia Blanton, “Chaste Marriage, Sexual Desire, and Christian Martyrdom in *La Vie Sainte Audrée*,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no.1 (2010): 94-114.

⁴ In the past several decades the field has gone from a handful of studies to an enormous literature meriting its own expansive online database, “Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index,” hosted by the University of Iowa Libraries, <http://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/AdvancedSearch.aspx>.

⁵ For a recent substantive treatment of the subject with an exhaustive bibliography, see Glenn W. Olsen, *Of Sodomites, Effeminate, Hermaphrodites, and Androgynes: Sodomy in the Age of Peter Damian* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011). On “Queer” as a critical term in medieval art history, see Karl Whittington, “Queer,” *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 155-68.

⁶ Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxv.

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Regarding the Book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* by Sister Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., 04.06.2012,”

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20120330_notafarley_en.html. Farley’s book was published by the Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.

⁸ Ibid. For Farley on these issues, see *Just Love*, 235-6 and 271-96.

⁹ In his exhortation, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Pope Francis states that “the reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion,” Chapter 1, I.104, published on the Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html#_ftnref74. On his support of the censure of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious (representing 80% of American nuns), see Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Pope Francis Keeps Tight Rein on U.S. Nuns,” *USA Today*, April 16, 2013; and Alessandro Spéciale, “Pope Francis Reconfirms Directive to American nuns,” *Christian Century* 130, no. 10 (2013): 18-19.

¹⁰ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 53.

¹¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 155.

¹² Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xiv.

¹³ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also the essays in Ingrid Bennewitz and Ingrid Kasten, *Genderdiskurse und Körperbilder im Mittelalter: eine Bilanzierung nach Butler und Laqueur* (Münster: Lit, 2002).

¹⁴ James Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xx; see also 17-47.

¹⁵ See James A. Schultz, “Bodies That Don’t Matter: Heterosexuality before Heterosexuality in Gottfried’s Tristan,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91-110; his “Heterosexuality as a Threat to Medieval Studies,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (2006): 14-29, and his chapter, “The Danger of Heterosexuality,” *Courtly Love*, 51-62. Cf. the discussion in Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, xiii.

¹⁶ Among other works, see *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to*

Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in Alison Bailey and Chris J. Cuomo, *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁸ See Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-75, esp. 1057. See also my discussion in "Gender," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 113-130, esp. 114-15.

¹⁹ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 59. Suzanne Lewis calls the medieval body "a site of resistance and challenge, involving the transcendence or deconstruction of seemingly fixed dichotomies;" see her "Introduction: Medieval Bodies Then and Now: Negotiating Problems of Ambivalence and Paradox," in *Naked before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox and Benjamin Withers (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003), 27; as cited and endorsed by Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, "The Exposed Body and the Gendered *Blemmye*: Reading the *Wonders of the East*," in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 198.

²⁰ Cf. Carolyn Dinshaw in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 17. In particular, she addresses Homi Bhabha, "Postcolonial Criticism," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles B. Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 473-57.

²¹ For recent bibliographical surveys, see Ruth Evans, "Introduction: What was Sexuality in the Middle Ages?" in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ruth Evans (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2011); and the essays in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), esp. the introduction by Albrecht Classen, "The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Beyond. A Secret Continuous Undercurrent or a Dominant Phenomenon of the Premodern World? Or: The Irrepressibility of Sex Yesterday and Today," 1-141. Of a number of other significant works dedicated to the subject, it is worth mentioning John W. Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland, 1996); Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; and Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*.

²² See for example, Sander L. Gilman, *Sexuality: An Illustrated History: Representing the Sexual in Medicine and Culture from the Middle Ages to the Age of Aids* (New York: Wiley, 1989); Hans-Jürgen Bachorski, *Ordnung und Lust: Bilder von Liebe, Ehe und Sexualität in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1991); Gabriele Bartz, Alfred Karnein, and Claudio Lange, *Liebesfreuden im Mittelalter: Kulturgeschichte der Erotik und Sexualität in Bildern und Dokumenten* (Stuttgart: Belser, 1994); Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (New York: Abrams, 1998); Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); and Ruth Evans, ed., *A Cultural History of Sexuality*.

²³ Richard C. Trexler, "Gendering Jesus Crucified," in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. Brendan Cassiday (Princeton, NJ: Index of Christian Art, 1993): 107-20, at 110.

²⁴ Trexler, "Gendering Christ Crucified," 110.

²⁵ See especially his *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland Circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). On the theological problem of the ostensible similarities

between sexual and mystical ecstasy, see Dyan Elliott, "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller, A. J. Minnis and Eamon Duffy (Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 1997), 141-74.

²⁶ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 222.

²⁷ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 145.

²⁸ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 222.

²⁹ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 222; see also, 218-19.

³⁰ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 220.

³¹ On the medieval view of female sexuality as polluting, see Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). The issue of how the female body was constructed as monstrous/demonic is also addressed in Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989); Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 7-24; James J. Paxson, "The Nether-Faced Devil and the Allegory of Parturition," *Studies in Iconography* 19 (1998): 130-76; and Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, "Barren Metal and the Fruitful Womb: the Program of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua," *Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 274-91. Cf. Leo Steinberg's art historical treatment of representations of male sexuality, in which male sexuality is theologically elevated with reference to Christ's body, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³² See note 16 above, and the related discussion of Bynum in my "Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: an Introduction," 11-12.

³³ Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 15. Cf. the still relevant remarks of David Halperin in "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (1989): 257-74.

³⁴ Cf. Madeline Caviness's method of "triangulation," first described in her online book, "Reframing Medieval Art: Difference, Margins, Boundaries," <http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/Caviness/> and discussed in the first issue of *Different Visions* (2008) dedicated to Caviness's work, "Triangulating our Vision," <http://differentvisions.org/one.html>.

³⁵ See Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." For a recent forum on the legacy of this article, see the AHR Forum, "Revisiting 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,'" *American Historical Review*, 113, no. 5 (2008): 1344-1429. Of particular interest to medievalists is Dyan Elliot's contribution, "The Three Ages of Joan Scott," 1390-1403. See also my "Gender," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 113-130.

³⁶ An observation also made by Martha Easton, "Was It Good for You Too? Medieval Erotic Art and its Audiences," *Different Visions* 1 (2008), 22 <http://differentvisions.org/one.html>. Brigitte Buettner observes that by the fifteenth century there was in art a lack of "male looked-at-ness, the erotic display of a male to a female observer," but she does not consider images of Christ as a potentially erotic sight to the female devout, nor does she cite examples of "male looked-at-ness" occurring before the fifteenth-century shift that she studies in her fascinating article, "Dressing and Undressing Bodies in Medieval Images," in *Künstlerischer Austausch. Akten des XXVIII. Internationalen Kongresses Für Kunstgeschichte, Berlin 15-20 July 1992: Volume I*, ed. Thomas Gaetgens (Berlin, Akademie Verlag: 1993), 383-92, at 387.

³⁷ Madeline H. Caviness, "Patron or Matron? A Capetian Bride and a Vade Mecum for Her Marriage Bed," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 333-62.

³⁸ Caviness discusses the reception of the piece and the feminist-themed issue of *Speculum* in which it appeared in her "Feminism, Gender Studies and Medieval Studies," *Diogenes* 57, no. 1 (2010), 31-32.

³⁹ See my discussion of "erotic" imagery in "Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: an Introduction," 21-23.

⁴⁰ "Desire and Eroticism in Medieval Europe, Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries: Sex without Sex," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2010).

- ⁴¹ Sarah Salih, "Erotica," in *A Cultural History of Sexuality*, 191 and 208.
- ⁴² Easton, as cited in note 36, above. Cf. Jane Long, "The Survival and Reception of the Classical Nude: Venus in the Middle Ages," in *Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, 47-64.
- ⁴³ Susan Smith, "The Gothic Mirror and the Female Gaze," in *Saints, Sinners, and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jane Louise Carroll and Alison G. Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 73-93.
- ⁴⁴ Smith, "Gothic Mirror," 75.
- ⁴⁵ Smith, "Gothic Mirror," 74, 84.
- ⁴⁶ Smith, "Gothic Mirror," 86.
- ⁴⁷ Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and its Alternatives* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also her earlier article on this topic, "'A Hue and a Cry': Medieval Rape Imagery and its Transformation," *Art Bulletin* 75, no. 1 (March 1993): 39-64.
- ⁴⁸ "'Douleur sur toutes autres': Revisualizing the Rape Script in the 'Epistre Othea' and 'Le Livre de la Cité des Dames'," in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41-70; see also chapter 5 in her *Images of Rape*.
- ⁴⁹ Martha Easton, "Saint Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence," *Studies in Iconography* 16 (1994): 83-118; "Pain, Torture, and Death in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 49-64; and also her "Uncovering the Meanings of Nudity in the *Belles Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry," in *Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, 149-81, esp. 151-156. Robert Mills has observed instances in which male saints were also apparently eroticized, see his "Whatever You Do Is a Delight to Me!": Masculinity, Masochism and Queer Play in Representations of Male Martyrdom," *Exemplaria* 13, no. 1 (2001): 1-37.
- ⁵⁰ See Kim Phillips's analysis of martyrdom stories as having "parasexual" appeal for young girls, "Desiring Virgins: Maidens, Martyrs, and Femininity in Late Medieval England," in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York: Boydell, 2004), 45-59. For a thoughtful analysis on the shifting dynamic of victimization, empowerment and hegemony that representations of martyrdoms can entail, see Robert Mills, "Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?," in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Ruth Evans, Sarah Salih and Anke Bernau (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 187-213.
- ⁵¹ Martha Easton, "The Wound of Christ, the Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages," in *Illuminations: Medieval and Renaissance Studies for Jonathan J.G. Alexander*, ed. Gerald B. Guest, Eric Inglis and Susan L'Engle (London: Harvey Miller/Brepols, 2006); see also, Flora Lewis, "The Wound in Christ's Side and the Instruments of the Passion: Gendered Experience and Response," in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 204-29.
- ⁵² Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1986): 399-439, esp. 405-7; Margaret R. Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York, NY: Icon Editions, 1992), 26-37; and her *A Complex Delight: the Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
- ⁵³ Sarah Salih, "When Is a Bosom Not a Bosom?" in *Medieval Virginites*, 14-32, esp. 19.
- ⁵⁴ Salih, "When is a Bosom not a Bosom," 23-26.
- ⁵⁵ See the important "Introduction: Virginites and Virginites Studies," by Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau and Ruth Evans in their edited volume, *Medieval Virginites*, and also the recent substantive study by Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), with additional bibliography.
- ⁵⁶ Cynthia Hahn, "'Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten, and Jesus Save Thee': The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Merode Triptych," *Art Bulletin* 68, no. 1 (1986): 54-66; Barbara Newman, "Intimate Pieties: Holy Trinity and Holy Family in the Late Middle Ages," *Religion & Literature* 31, no. 1 (1999):

77-101; Pamela Sheingorn, "'Illustri Patriarcha Joseph': Jean Gerson, Representations of Saint Joseph, and Imagining Community among Churchmen in the Fifteenth Century," in *Visions of Community in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Nicholas Howe (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 75-108.

⁵⁷ Lindquist, "Meanings of Nudity: An Introduction," 11-12, quoting Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 43-44.

⁵⁸ K.A. Smith, "Inventing Marital Chastity: The Iconography of Susanna and the Elders in Early Christian Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1993): 3-24. Cf. Christelle Baskins's fascinating treatment of the theme in late medieval and Renaissance *caissoni*, "La Festa di Susanna": Virtue on Trial in Renaissance Sacred Drama and Painted Wedding Chests," *Art History* 14, no. 3 (1991): 329-44.

⁵⁹ For discussion of the images of this saint, see Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix Images of St. Wilgefortis since the Middle Ages* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). Cf. Martha Easton, who argues that these representations paradoxically reinforced typical gender roles, see her, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man? Transforming and Transcending Gender in the Lives of Female Saints," in *The Four Modes of Seeing: Approaches to Medieval Art*, ed. Elizabeth Pastan, Ellen M. Shortell and Evelyn Staudinger Lane (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

⁶⁰ Juliette Dor, "The Sheela-Na-Gig: An Incongruous Sign of Sexual Purity?" in *Medieval Virginites*, 33-55.

⁶¹ Marian Bleeker, "Sheelas, Sex, and Significance in Romanesque Sculpture: The Kilpeck Corbel Series," *Studies in Iconography* 26 (2005): 1-26, with additional bibliography. Cf. my discussion of Sheela-na-gigs in Lindquist, "Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art: An Introduction," 19-20.

⁶² Sarah Salih, "The Trouble with 'Female Sexuality,'" *Different Visions* 4 (2013): 1.