"Lesbian-Like" and the Social History of Lesbianisms

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IN QUEER STUDIES, social history is "queer." Gay and lesbian histories abound with insightful analyses of texts produced by the powerful and privileged, but they are relatively poor in scholarship about the ordinary lives of average people.[1] I offer here a proposal that might adjust this balance a bit. The rich insights brought by intellectual, cultural, and literary studies of same-sex love are invaluable, but I seek to complement these with more complete understandings of the same-sex relations of people who were more real than imagined and more ordinary than extraordinary.[2] For example, I have been delighted to read in recent years about how medieval theologians

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[1] Social history is not, of course, confined to the study of ordinary people, for it is perfectly possible to write a social history of aristocrats or other privileged folk. Yet social history is distinguished from most historical approaches by its relatively greater interest in average people. In the case of queer studies, social history is "queer" not only in its greater emphasis on ordinary people but also in its questions (about actual practices and lives) and its greater reliance on documentary sources.

[2] The "real" is, of course, always apparitional, always a reductionist fantasy. See particularly Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773–797. Yet acknowledging the fantasy of "reality" does not, I think, reduce history to fiction; historians

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conceptualized (or failed to conceptualize) same-sex relations between women; about how medieval nuns might have expressed same-sex desire in their kissing of images of Christ's wound; about how a lesbian character might have lurked in the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence,* a story with a cross-dressed heroine; and about how a fourteenth-century Parisian play explored the meanings of accidental marriage between two women.[3] But I want more. I want to know about the actual practices and lives of ordinary women—more than ninety percent of medieval women—who never met a theologian, contemplated Christ's wound, heard a romance, or even saw a Parisian play.

This challenge is not peculiar to either women's history or medieval history. I shall not explore in this essay the ways in which my suggestion—a category of "lesbian-like"—might (or might not) have analogous applications to the histories of gay men, but it is certainly clear that gay studies have been dominated by the words and writings of elite men—from Plato and Aelred of Rievaulx to Oscar Wilde and Armistead Maupin. Before the twentieth century, ordinary gay men can be traced most often in records of legal or religious persecution, records whose terse and sad entries compete poorly with the often rich and illuminating writings of philosophers, monks, diarists, and novelists. Lesbian histories are, of course, even more challenging to construct, for even fewer documents tell of past lesbians among either privileged or ordinary folk. Women wrote less; their writings survived less often (Sappho's works are the classic example); and they were less likely than men to come to the attention of civic or religious authorities. For more recent times, it is certainly easier to locate lesbians of ordinary circumstances—one need only think of the love shared by Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus in late nineteenth-century Hartford or of the culture of Buffalo's lesbian bars in the mid-twentieth century.[4] But even recent lesbian history is dominated by women who were wealthier, better educated,

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can still seek out the more multivalent and still substantial "actual" and "plausible." In this regard, I am indebted to Charles Zita who introduced me to Greg Dening's distinction between the possibilities of "actuality" and the reductionism of "reality." See especially Greg Dening, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), p. 60.

[3] Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality,* ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 191–223; Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* ed. Karma Lochrie, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 180–200; Kathleen M. Blumreich, "Lesbian Desire in the Old French *Roman de Silence,*" *Arthuriana* 7:2 (1997): 47–62; Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, "Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama," *New Literary History* 28:2 (1997): 319–344.

[4] Karen V. Hansen, "'No *Kisses* is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Gender and History* 7:2 (1995):

more powerful, and more articulate than most: Anne Lister, Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, M. Carey Thomas, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rita Mae Brown. I shall argue my case using medieval evidence, which I know best, but the particular difficulties of this evidence make it exemplary, not peculiar. If "lesbian-like" can allow us to create a social history of poorly documented medieval lesbianisms, it might be even more useful for better documented peoples and times.

The medieval problem is bleak and simply stated. We can find information about medieval lesbian practices in the writings of theologians and canonists, in some very suggestive literary texts, and even in a few artistic representations, but if we want to write about actual women whom extant sources explicitly associate with same-sex genital contact, we have, as best I can tell, about a dozen women for the entire medieval millennium: all of them from the fifteenth century, and all of them either imprisoned or executed for their activities.[5] This is material for only a *very* modest social history, and no matter how carefully we scour the religious and cultural remains of medieval Europe, it leaves us with a haunting

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153–182; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[5] Unlike historians of more modern eras, who might find information about the same-sex relations of ordinary women in letters, diaries, and other personal memorabilia or even through oral interviews, medievalists must rely on criminal accusations. This especially limits our purview, for it allows us to see lesbians only in scripted contexts that emphasize deviance, disorder, and danger. The pre-1500 cases identified thus far are as follows: (a) seven women executed in Bruges in 1482–3. Marc Boone, "State Power and Illicit Sexuality: The Persecution of Sodomy in Late Medieval Bruges," *Journal of Medieval History* 22:2 (1996): 135–153 at 151, n. 62 (Boone also cites some cases in the early sixteenth century); (b) a reputed lesbian drowned in Speier in 1477. Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6:1/2 (1980–1): 11–25 at 17; (c) two women charged with a "vice against nature which is called sodomy" in Rottweil in 1444. Helmut Puff, "Localizing Sodomy: The 'Priest and Sodomite' in Pre-Reformation Germany and Switzerland," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8:2 (1997): 165–195, at 182–3; (d) two women cited in a French royal register of 1405. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 224. Some of these cases are examined more fully in two forthcoming articles: Helmut Puff, "Female Sodomy, 1477," forthcoming in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* and Edith J. Benkov, "The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe," in *Same-Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages,* ed. Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (forthcoming from St. Martin's Press). Since I have argued elsewhere that 1500 marks an artificial divide in women's history, I would like to stress that my reliance on it here is purely rhetorical. It is striking how many forays into the study of medieval lesbianisms rely on non-medieval cases (especially the early seventeenth-century case of Benedetta Carlini), but even these extensions of the Middle Ages do not result in many more cases. See, for example, the relative paucity of female same-sex relations prosecuted in eighteenth-century Amsterdam: Theo Van der Meer, "Tribades on Trial: Female Same-Sex Offenders in Late Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam," *Journal of the History of*

problem. Where were the women who loved other women and how can we now recover their histories?

As always, these questions have things at stake behind them, things that make their answers more than a mere academic exercise.[6] My objectives are two-fold. First, I want to participate in the creation of histories that can have meaning for those women who today identify as lesbians, bisexuals, queers, or otherwise. This search has parallels in the social histories of other minorities, and it speaks to the emancipatory possibilities of history. Some historians would downplay this aspect of their work; I am not among them. History is not mere antiquarianism, fascinated with the past for its sake alone and assuming, naively, that there is a unitary past reality that can be approached, albeit not fully uncovered. In its best forms, history transcends the antiquarian impulse, seeking, of course, to understand the past in its proper contexts but seeking also to play with the ways in which the past illumines the present and the present illumines the past. As V. A. Kolve recently noted, "we have little choice but to acknowledge our modernity, admit that our interest in the past is always (and by no means illegitimately) born of present concerns."[7]

Second, I seek ways better to resist the heterosexist bias of history-writing, especially as seen in the history of women. This queering, if you like, of women's history is essential and long overdue. In recent years, one feminist historian has bewailed the "distorted and unhappy life" of medieval nuns, seen by her as forced to chose between the joys of heterosexual sex and motherhood, on the one hand, and a life of learning and contemplation, on the other. For Gerda Lerner, both heterosexual intercourse and childbearing were (and presumably still are) normal and desirable for women, and medieval nuns—as well as many early feminists—are to be pitied for having had to do without these purported joys.[8] Another feminist historian has produced an impassioned history of female monasticism,

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Sexuality 1:3 (1991): 424–445. For Benedetta Carlini, see Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For my argument on chronology, see "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide," in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 147–175 (revised version in *Feminists Revision History*, ed. Ann-Louise Shapiro [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994], pp. 47–72).

[6] For the importance of stressing strategic considerations in discussions such as these, see Shane Phelan, "(Be)coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics," *Signs* 18:4 (1993): 765–790.

[7] V. A. Kolve, "Ganymede/*Son of Getron*: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire," *Speculum* 73:4 (1998): 1014–1067, at 1016.

[8] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 179. This phrase is applied to female writers before the mid-nineteenth century, a group that implicitly includes the medieval nuns and mystics discussed earlier.

a history that nowhere notes the evidence—as discussed by Ann Matter and others—of intense emotional and homoerotic relations between medieval nuns. For Jo Ann McNamara, the celibacy of medieval nuns seems to have been threatened only by men.[9] And a third feminist historian has written about ordinary women in the medieval countryside in ways that normalize the heterosexual lifestyle. For myself, when I studied peasant women in the 1980s, the marriage-defined roles of not-yet-wed daughter, married wife, and bereaved widow loomed deceptively large.[10] Women's history must not continue along this road, simply must not continue to view women—from whatever time or place—through such a distorting heteronormative lens.

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Where, then, were the medieval women who loved other women and how can we recover their histories? To date, medievalists have responded to the sparse evidence for actual lesbian practices by focusing on intellectual or cultural approaches, not social history. The intellectual approach has focused mostly on why lesbianism was so underplayed—compared to male homosexuality—in the literatures of the Middle Ages. Most medieval physicians discussed male homosexuality much more fully than lesbianism; most authors of penitentials (that is, handbooks designed to guide priests in assigning penance during confession) either ignored lesbianism or rated it a lesser sin than male homosexuality; most theologians similarly either overlooked or trivialized same-sex relations between women. Why was lesbian practice so relatively untroubling? To John Boswell, the answer lies in the importance of women as conduits of bloodlines; since same-sex intimacy between women neither produced

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Lerner also describes medieval mystics in terms of "sacrifices" (p. 65) and "insecurity, sickness" (p. 83). On p. 30, she concludes that the single, cloistered, or widowed status of many learned women suggests that women were unable to "combine a sexual and reproductive life with the life of the intellect" and were "forced to choose between the life of a woman and the life of the mind."

[9] Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). McNamara speaks briefly about emotional attachments between women on pp. 76 and 113, and she cursorily mentions medieval fears of same-sex attractions between women on pp. 144 and 380. As best I can tell, these references are her only considerations of the possibility of emotional and/or sexual intimacy between medieval nuns. For fuller attention to same-sex desire between nuns, see Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:2 (1986): 81–93; Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts."

[10] Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

bastards nor introduced false heirs into lineages, it was relatively unproblematic.[11] To Jacqueline Murray, the phallocentric sexuality of the Middle Ages best explains its obfuscation of lesbian activity; as long as women-loving women did not use dildoes or other devices that seemingly mimicked penises, their same-sex relations were not seen by many medieval writers as being fully sexual.[12] To Harry Kuster and Raymond Cormier, sperm loom larger than phalluses; Kuster and Cormier suggest that in the "spermatic economy" of medieval understandings of sex, little harm was done in same-sex relations between women—since no sperm were spilled.[13] To Joan Cadden, lesbian invisibility is part of the subordinate place of all women in the Middle Ages; seen as lesser, more passive, and secondary players in reproduction, women were easily overlooked by physicians and natural philosophers.[14]

These explanations are plausible and intriguing, and they are not mutually exclusive. But they too often construe a tiny group of authors as representing a broad medieval reality, reconstructing medieval attitudes about same-sex love between women mostly from the ideas of clerics—that is, the most male and most sexually anxious segment of medieval society. The observations and speculations of this clerical minority are certainly impressive, but their world view too often becomes, in modern interpretations, *the* medieval world-view.[15] I am delighted to know what medieval theologians, canonists, and physicians thought about lesbianism, but their thoughts represent their sex, their education, their class privilege, and their professional contexts, as well as their time. In this sense, I am sympathetic with Catharine MacKinnon's comment that in most histories of sexuality "the silence of

[11] John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), pp. xxvii–xxx.

[12] As Murray phrases it on p. 199 of "Twice Marginal," for medieval people, "[s]exual activity without a penis was difficult to imagine."

[13] Harry J. Kuster and Raymond J. Cormier, "Old Views and New Trends: Observations on the Problem of Homosexuality in the Middle Ages," *Studi Medievali*, ser. 3, 25 (1984): 587–610, esp. 600–601, 609.

[14] Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex*, p. 224.

[15] Hence, for example, Jacqueline Murray writes about "the devaluation of physical relations across medieval society" ("Twice Marginal," p. 206). This was perhaps true for theologians, philosophers, and other clerics, but it was certainly *not* true for ordinary medieval people—peasants, laborers, artisans, merchants—whose appreciation of physical relations is manifestly clear in their bawdy tales and songs. For just two examples of such alternative discourses, see two songs copied into the commonplace book of an Oxford student in the fifteenth century, "Led I the Dance a Midsummer's Day" and "All this Day I have Sought," both printed in Richard Leighton Greene, *The Early English Carols,* 2d edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1977), items 453 and 452 respectively. The latter has been rendered in modern English by P. J. P. Goldberg in his *Women in England c. 1275–1535* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 88–90, but he left out the sexually explicit stanzas.

the silenced is filled by the speech of those who have it and the fact of the silence is forgotten."[16]

Still, in comparing how medieval theologians, physicians, canonists, and other authors treated male homosexuality and lesbianism, this intellectual approach has usefully delineated differences between elite perceptions of male same-sex relations, on the one hand, and female same-sex relations, on the other. To these medieval writers, same-sex love between women seemed less sexual than male homosexuality; it more often prompted explanations based on purported physical deformities; it was doubly perverse for positing love not only of the *same* sex but also of the *lesser* sex; and if it resulted in marriage resistance, it could be profoundly disruptive.[17] Among these authors, same-sex relations between women or men in the Middle Ages were not entirely unrelated, but they were certainly distinct. These elite understandings usefully remind us that when a medieval woman had sex with another woman, she did so within physical, social, familial, sexual, and gendered contexts quite different from those of a medieval man who had sex with another man.[18]

Literary and cultural scholars have also responded in creative ways to the virtual absence of actual women from the sources of medieval lesbianisms. In their playful and provocative readings of medieval texts, these critics have found homoerotic possibilities not only in the sources cited at the beginning of this essay but also in the music of Hildegarde of Bingen;

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[16] Catharine MacKinnon, "Does Sexuality Have a History?" in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 117–136 at 121.

[17] Bernadette J. Brooten has similarly observed that the "highly gendered, social arrangements" of same-sex love in ancient Rome distinguished male homosexuality and lesbianism. See her *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), quote at p. 14. For the greater physicality of elite understandings of lesbianism, see Helen Rodmite Lemay, "William of Saliceto on Human Sexuality," *Viator* 12 (1981): 165–181, at 178–9, and also Katharine Park, "The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570–1620," in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe,* ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 170–193. There is some evidence that the bodies of male homosexuals were occasionally also seen as marked by their acts. See: Steven F. Kruger, "Racial/Religious and Sexual Queerness in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 16 (Fall, 1993): 32–36, esp. 34 (to me, his evidence suggests physical revulsion on the part of medieval commentators, not an attribution of physical deformity to male homosexuals); Joan Cadden, "Sciences/Silences: The Natures and Languages of 'Sodomy' in Peter of Abano's *Problemata* Commentary," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* pp. 40–57; Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), esp. pp. 114–135.

[18] As Judith Butler has made very clear, it would be a mistake to overlook matters of gender difference when studying sexuality. See her "Against Proper Objects," *differences* 6:2/3 (1994): 1–26.

in the piety of the mystic Hadwijch of Brabant; in the admonitions of the anonymous author of *Holy Maidenhead*; in the ragings of Margery Kempe; and even in the cross-dressing of Joan of Arc.[19] Although these analyses offer insightful commentaries on how we might better imagine the sexual mentalities of the Middle Ages, even the best of them can give me pause. As literary criticism, these readings reach plausible conclusions, but as guides to social history, they are considerably less convincing.

To begin with, many of these readings draw on mystical texts—that is, texts that were profoundly obscure at the time of their composition and are profoundly hard to interpret today. As Ulrike Wiethaus has suggested, the obscurity of these texts *might* have allowed female mystics to express and still mask same-sex desires.[20] But the obscurity of these texts *might* also encourage modern scholars to read desires into them that would have been foreign to their authors: fascinating readings, in other words, rather than historically plausible ones. Caroline Bynum, whose opinions have considerable authority in studies of mysticism, female spirituality, and conceptions of the body, has resisted lesbian readings of such texts, arguing that we too readily sexualize medieval somatic experiences and expressions. Others, such as Karma Lochrie, vehemently disagree, arguing that Bynum resolutely sees maternity where same-sex affections might, in fact, have been at play.[21] The debate on this issue has only just begun, but in the meantime, those who, like myself, are interested in actual people and plausible behaviors might best respond with caution—as well as pleasure—to literary readings of same-sex expressions in mystical texts.

Moreover, in other cases, I have been more impressed by the cleverness of modern critics than by the historicity of their arguments. It is great fun, for example, to read Lochrie's impressive exploration of the artistic, literary, and linguistic ties between Christ's wound and female genitalia, and to speculate, therefore, that the kissing of images of Christ's wound by medieval nuns somehow paralleled lesbian oral sex. Yet Lochrie very wisely

[19]Bruce Holsinger, "The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegarde of Bingen (1098–1179)," *Signs* 19:1 (1993): 92–125; Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse"; Ulrike Wiethaus, "Female Homoerotic Discourse and Religion in Medieval Germanic Culture," in *Difference and Genders in Medieval Society and Culture,* ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Pasternak (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press); Mary Anne Campbell, "Redefining Holy Maidenhead: Virginity and Lesbianism in Late Medieval England," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter,* 13 (1992): 14–15; Kathy Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe,*" in *Premodern Sexualities,* ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 175–198; Susan Crane, "Clothing and Gender Definition: Joan of Arc," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26:2 (1996): 297–320.

[20]Wiethaus, "Female Homoerotic Discourse."

[21]This maternal interpretation runs throughout Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

does not claim that any medieval nun who contemplated Christ's wound ever, in fact, was really thinking about last night's tumble in bed with a sister nun.[22] Within the traditions of literary scholarship, readings such as Lochrie's can stand on their own, properly appreciated for their careful and insightful explication of interpretive possibilities. Yet they sometimes speak less convincingly about the historical issues that concern me—the possibilities of same-sex love between actual women in the Middle Ages.

If we are to move beyond elite understandings of lesbian relations in the Middle Ages and beyond intriguing-but-not-fully-historicized readings that interrupt, redirect, or even queer the canonical texts of medieval studies, we need to complement—and I *do* mean complement, not supplant—intellectual and cultural approaches with social historical study. To accomplish this, we need much more than the brief and depressing notices we have about the dozen or so women who found themselves in legal trouble for same-sex relations in the fifteenth century. These might be the only women for whom we can be reasonably confident about same-sex genital contact, but they need not be the only women whose stories are relevant to lesbian history.[23] To approach the social history of lesbianisms in the Middle Ages, I suggest that we try broadening our perspective to include women whom I have chosen to call "lesbian-like": women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage;

1987), but see also her explicit statement in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1992), p. 86. For Karma Lochrie's critique, see "Mystical Acts" in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* and "Desiring Foucault," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27:1 (1997): 3–16.

[22]Lochrie, "Mystical Acts." In public discussion at the 1998 conference on the Queer Middle Ages, Karma Lochrie indicated her willingness to entertain the possibility that medieval nuns did, in fact, venerate Christ's wound in ways that spoke to their own same-sex desires and actions.

[23]Although same-sex sexual contact was the issue in these cases, legal records do not, of course, constitute truthful records. Moreover, in many cases (such as the case of Laurence and Jehanne, discussed below), one woman asserted her innocence by accusing the other of unnatural aggression toward her—that is, one was scripted as "normal" and the other as "abnormal." Still, most other indicators of lesbian relations in medieval records are less transparently sexual, and they are also more susceptible to erasure through interpretation. See, for example, Angelica Rieger's argument that Bieris de Romans, author of a love song addressed to another woman, was not, in fact, a lesbian. Angelica Rieger, "Was Bieris de Romans Lesbian? Women's Relations with Each Other in the World of the Troubadours," in *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on Women Troubadours,* ed. William D. Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), pp. 73–94. Given the heteronormativity of modern scholarship and the homophobia of many modern scholars, almost all citations to lesbian or gay practices can, of course, be interpreted out of existence—and done so in ways that suit academic culture particularly well. As a result, each instance of the interpretive denial of same-sex relations must be approached with careful skepticism.

women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women (to paraphrase Blanche Wiesen Cook's famous formulation).[24] I first coined the term "lesbian-like" in a paper presented in 1990; Martha Vicinus adopted it to good effect in an article published in 1994, and it is now being used by such other historians as Alison Oram.[25] Thus far, however, the term has been more evoked than explored, and in this essay, I would like to undertake that exploration. What might "lesbian-like" really mean? How might it enhance the ways in which we approach the history of lesbianisms?

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It may seem crazy to create yet another piece of jargon and to link to it a troubled term like "lesbian." After all, no one today is really sure what "lesbian" means. Are lesbians born or made? Do lesbians delight in sex with women exclusively or can the term encompass those who enjoy sex with men as well as women? What defines lesbian sex—genital contact, "bosom sex," or an even more amorphous "erotic in female terms"?[26] And, indeed, might sexual practice be less determinative of lesbianism than *desire* for women, *primary love* for women (as in "women-identified women"), or even *political* commitment to women (especially as manifested in resistance to "compulsory heterosexuality")? Lesbian theorists offer us debate on these questions, not firm agreement, and this definitional fluidity has been a source of both anxiety and flexibility.

Nevertheless, the ever-changing contemporary meanings of "lesbian" have often been belied by a persistent assumption of a core lesbian identity, especially when used in such expressions as "she came out as a lesbian." This invocation of identity is both affirming and embarrassing. To me, it still speaks powerfully about the revelation of self I felt when I first had sex with another woman in 1973, but it also, in 2000, seems to be unduly naive, simple, and maybe even silly. Still worse, it can work to obfuscate critical differences. Do various sorts of women who love women—femmes and butches, lesbian feminists and lipstick lesbians, va-

[24] Blanche Wiesen Cook, "The Historical Denial of Lesbianism," *Radical History Review* 20 (1979): 60–65.

[25] Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?" *Radical History Review* 60 (1994): 57–75. Alison Oram, "'Friends', Feminists and Sexual Outlaws: Lesbianism and British History," in *Straight Studies Modified: Lesbian Interventions in the Academy,* ed. Gabriele Griffin and Sonya Andermahr (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 168–183.

[26] I am grateful to Emily McLain for helping me see how a focus on genital contact can rest in heterosexist and phallocentric assumptions. For "bosom sex," see Hansen, "No *Kisses.*" For the "erotic in female terms," see Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 (1980), pp. 631–60 at 650.

nilla lesbians and sexual radicals, American lesbians and Jamaican lesbians, rich lesbians and poor ones, 15-year-old lesbians and 55-year-old ones, African-American lesbians and Asian-American lesbians—really share enough to fit comfortably under the rubric "lesbian"? Are "we," in other words, really a "we"?

These are troubles enough, but for historians, "lesbian" is also troubled by its apparent contemporaneity. To many scholars, the use of "lesbian" to describe women before the late nineteenth century reeks of ahistoricism, and especially of the naive search for past heroines plucked out of historical context and reclaimed for presentist uses. For some (mostly premodernists), it is important to preserve the past from presentist concerns. For others (mostly modernists), it is important to preserve the distinctiveness of modernity, especially as represented by a pseudo-Foucaultian paradigm that restricts sexual identities and, indeed, sexuality itself to the modern era.[27] Strange bedfellows, traditional medievalists and queer theorists, and their coalition is powerful enough to encourage many historians to abandon "lesbian" in favor of terms less laden with contemporary identities, such as "homoerotic" or "same-sex relations." This concession is, I think, both unnecessary and counterproductive.[28]

In the first place, "lesbian" has considerable antiquity, and its use by historians accords well with long-accepted professional practices. More than a thousand years ago, the Byzantine commentator Arethas associated "lesbian" with same-sex relations between women. By equating *Lesbiai* with *tribades* and *hetairistriai,* Arethas indicated that, to at least one person in the tenth century, the term "lesbian" roughly signified what it roughly signifies today.[29] In English, the first uses of "lesbian" to denote

[27]As I understand David Halperin's new essay in *Representations,* we need no longer flounder on the shoals of the distinction between sex acts and sexual identities. Even Halperin—perhaps the most fervent of social constructionists—now agrees that there were, indeed, sexual *identities* before the nineteenth century; our job is to try to understand the very different constituents of these past sexual identities. David Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality," *Representations* 63 (1998): 93–120. This project has perhaps been best illustrated, to date, by Anna Clark's essay on Anne Lister which shows how, long before sexologists like Havelock Ellis or Richard von Krafft-Ebing could have provided her with a ready-made identity, Anne Lister fashioned one for herself, from her "inherent desires," from her "material circumstances," and from the "cultural representations" available to her. Anna Clark, "Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7:1 (1996): 23–50, at p. 27.

[28]Refusal to apply the term "lesbian" to historical subjects often serves to affirm the historical professionalism of the author, and for those researching as undervalued a field as the historical study of lesbians, this affirmation can be both strategic and appealing. For an example, see Hansen, "No Kisses": 173.

[29]Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women,* p. 5. For the original modern reference, see Albio Cesare Cassio, "Post-Classical Λέσβίσί," *The Classical Quarterly,* n.s., 33:1 (1983),

same-sex relations between women date at least as early as the 1730s.[30] Unlike "gay" or "queer," then, "lesbian" has deep historical roots. Yet even without these roots, "lesbian" can, with due care, apply just as well to the past as do many other terms that have recent origins or meanings. In historical writing, it is not uncommon to find, for example, that Jakob Fugger was a "capitalist" (long before Adam Smith and Karl Marx), that Thomas Aquinas was "Catholic" (although he lived several centuries before Catholicism took on its post-Reformation meaning), or that the Black Prince prepared for "kingship" (even though it was kingship of a different sort than that anticipated today by Charles Windsor). Historians are accustomed to using modern words to investigate past times, to assessing the changing meanings of words over time, and to weighing differences as well as similarities in their uses of such words. We should try to allow the same historical range, with the same comparative cautions, for "lesbian."

Indeed, to do otherwise might do more harm than good. First, the refusal to use "lesbian" defers to homophobia and thereby promotes heteronormative misconceptions of the past. To some people, "lesbian" is a more upsetting word than "capitalist," "Catholic," or "king," and it can seem rude or slanderous to suggest that such women as Margery Kempe or Hildegarde of Bingen had feelings or experiences that we might associate with modern lesbianisms. This homophobic anxiety works on many levels, some articulated and others unacknowledged. Its main effect is bad history, history driven by heteronormative imperatives. For example, our modern tendency to classify women according to sex of lovers—and thereby labeling them as lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, or whatever—does not seem to work well for the European Middle Ages. Penitentials suggest that medieval theologians thought in terms of a wide range of sexual activities, among which choosing a lover of the same sex was only one of many possible sexual sins. Romances suggest that aristocratic husbands worried more that their wives might produce illegitimate heirs and less that their wives might love others or, indeed, might play with lovers in non-reproductive ways. And a wide variety of sources indicates that medieval people identified themselves less by sexual practice and more by other criteria—willful or repentant sinner; householder or dependent; serf, free, or wellborn; Christian or Jew. Insofar as there *were* sexual identities in the Middle Ages, the best articulated might have been those of the celibate and the virginal.[31] These are important and profound differences that sepa-

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pp. 296–297. Scholars debate Arethas' precise meaning—he might, for example, have used "lesbian" more as an eponym than as a classification—but the link between "lesbian" and "female same-sex relations" seems quite clear.

[30]Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p. 3.

rate the world of medieval Europe from our world today, but they can disappear in history-writing that seeks out heterosexuality as pervasive, natural, and ideal.

Second, a refusal to apply "lesbian" to the distant past stabilizes things that are better kept in a state of productive instability. Is there such a stable entity as a modern lesbian? Clearly not. Was there such a stable meaning to "lesbian" in any past time? Probably not. We should play with these instabilities and learn from them, not reify one in order to deny relationship with the other. For example, medieval sexual regimes look very different from our own, but our information is, as yet, very preliminary and even contradictory. Some scholars are finding that medieval people operated on a one-sex system that saw the male body as the sole standard, others that medieval people embraced a two-sex binary that rigidly separated male and female; and still others that medieval people played readily with ideas about intermediate genders or third sexes.[32] Are these differences a matter of method or reading? A matter of sources or genre? A matter of competing or complementary medieval ideologies? We cannot yet say. We need more readings, more research, and more speculations before we can sort out even the most basic aspects of medieval sexual practices. In these circumstances, it would be counterproductive to create a tidy discrimination between the abundance of modern lesbianisms and what we still have to learn about medieval sexualities.[33] In short, one of our first steps toward understanding the antecedents of modern sexual identities must be to examine how well and how poorly our modern ideas of "lesbians" and "heterosexual women" and "bisexuals" and "queers" work for the past. If we avoid these terms altogether, we will create a pure,

[31] I am grateful to Ruth Karras for stressing this point to me. For further discussion of medieval sexual identities, see Ruth Mazo Karras, "Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe," *Journal of Women's History* 11:2 (1999): 159–177, with comments by Theo van der Meer and Carla Frecerro and response by Karras, 179–198.

[32] Carol Clover has argued that Norse sagas suggest "a one-sex, one-gender model with a vengeance." Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe," in *Studying Medieval Women,* ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1993), pp. 61–87, quote at 84. Joan Cadden has argued that medical texts suggest so strong a commitment to a two-gender binary that variations could only be understood within that binary (for example, as a female man rather than a third sex). Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference,* esp. pp. 221–227. Jane Burns has argued that medieval romances so play with "gender indeterminacy" as to create characters of mixed male and female qualities. E. Jane Burns, "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* pp. 111–134, quote at 134. See also Cary J. Nederman and Jacqui True, "The Third Sex: The Idea of the Hermaphrodite in Twelfth-Century Europe," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6:4 (1996): 497–517.

[33] A useful analogy can be made here with women's history, which rushed far too readily, in my opinion, to assuming and thereby finding radical discontinuities in gender relations,

inviolable, and irrelevant past: a fetish instead of a history.[34] And we will risk doing the same to the present. No word has transparent meaning, now or in the past.

In any case, I am suggesting not the use of "lesbian," but instead the use of "lesbian-like," a hyphenated construction that both names "lesbian" and destabilizes it.[35] The "lesbian" in "lesbian-like" articulates the often-unnamed, forcing historians who might prefer otherwise to deal with their own heterosexist assumptions and with the possibility of lesbian expressions in the past. Yet at the same time as the term forthrightly names the unnamed, the "like" in "lesbian-like" decenters "lesbian," introducing into historical research a productive uncertainty born of likeness and resemblance, not identity. It might therefore allow us to expand lesbian history beyond its narrow and quite unworkable focus on women who engaged in certifiable same-sex genital contact (a certification hard to achieve even for many contemporary women), and to incorporate into lesbian history women who, regardless of their sexual pleasures, lived in ways that offer certain affinities with modern lesbians. In so doing, we might incorporate into lesbian history sexual rebels, gender rebels, marriage-resisters, cross-dressers, singlewomen. It struck me as a "herstory" sort of invention until I read below that this was the term used in early England, that there were women who found special sustenance in female worlds of love and ritual.[36] I hope that, in such ways, "lesbian-like" might speak to our modern need for a useable past, for what Margaret Hunt has called the "cautious kinship" that can link our many lives with the histories of those long dead.[37]

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past and present. Only now are women's historians starting to reconsider these early and over-hasty judgments, and we are finding, in the process, some quite remarkable continuities in the histories of women, ancient, medieval, and modern. Judith M. Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," *Journal of Women's History* 9:3 (1997): 73–94.

[34] As medievalists know well, the desire to create an inviolate past runs strong and deep along the line that separates "medieval" and "modern"—and it usually imagines "medieval" as the evil twin of modernity, as the repository of all that is "not-modern." This pernicious construction has been recently interrogated by so many medievalists that I need not belabor its difficulties. See, among others, Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65:1 (1990): 87–108; Louise O. Fradenburg with Carla Freccero, "The Pleasures of History," *GLQ* 1 (1995): 371–384; Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women." Almost every contributor to the special issues of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 13 (1992) on "Gay and Lesbian Concerns in Medieval Studies" and *GLQ* 1 (1995) on "Premodern Sexualities in Europe" rejected the medieval/modern distinction.

[35] I am grateful to Sarah Ferber for explicating for me the useful instabilities of this term.

[36] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," as reprinted in her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 53–76.

[37] Margaret Hunt, "Afterword," in *Queering the Renaissance,* ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 359–377, at 372.

As a social historian, I am most interested in exploring affinities that are broadly sociological—affinities related to social conduct, marital status, living arrangements, and other behaviors that might be traced in the archives of past societies. I would therefore like to play with the implications of naming as lesbian-like a range of practices that impinge on our own modern—and very variable—ideas about lesbianism. If women had genital sex with other women, regardless of their marital or religious status, let us consider that their behavior was lesbian-like. If women's primary emotions were directed toward other women, regardless of their own sexual practices, perhaps their affection was lesbian-like. If women lived in single-sex communities, their life circumstances might be usefully conceptualized as lesbian-like. If women resisted marriage or, indeed, just did not marry, whatever the reason, their singleness can be seen as lesbian-like. If women dressed as men, whether in response to saintly voices, in order to study, in pursuit of certain careers, or just to travel with male lovers, their cross-dressing was arguably lesbian-like. And if women worked as prostitutes or otherwise flouted norms of sexual propriety, we might see their deviance as lesbian-like.

Unlike Adrienne Rich, I do not wish to label all woman-identified experience—from maternal nurturance and lesbian sadomasochism to the esprit de corps of an abortion rights march—on a lesbian continuum.[38] The essence of Rich's continuum is "primary intensity between and among women," an intensity that involves both "sharing of a rich inner life" and "bonding against male tyranny." Some behaviors that I would identify as lesbian-like—such as singleness—were not necessarily based in the female bonding at the center of Rich's analysis. To my mind, a singlewoman in a sixteenth-century European town, regardless of her emotional life, lived in ways relevant to lesbian history: she tended to be poor, in part because her household was not supported by the better earning power of men; she was viewed by her neighbors with some suspicion and concern; she could expect to be tolerated, *if* her conduct was above reproach in other respects. This singlewoman might have shared neither an emotional life nor any political commitment with other women, but her life circumstances were, in some respects, lesbian-like.

Unlike Martha Vicinus, I do not wish to privilege sexual behaviors in defining lesbians past or present.[39] Many lesbian-like behaviors—such as the deep attachments formed between some medieval nuns—were not necessarily sexual in expression. I certainly am not eager to wash sexuality out of lesbian-like, but same-sex relations are not a sine qua non of lesbianism

[38]Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality."

[39]Vicinus, "Lesbian History: All Theory" focuses especially on the issue of "knowing for sure" about *sexual* contact between women.

(as the debates of lesbian theorists make clear), and if we treat lesbianism as rooted primarily or even exclusively in sexuality, we create very limited histories (as rehearsed above for the Middle Ages). In thinking about both "lesbian" and "lesbian-like," sexual behavior is certainly important, but it need not be defining.

I am hesitant to restrict the purview of "lesbian-like," for, as Greta Christina has argued so well, patrolling the borders of any loaded term is a divisive and elitist business.[40] But I am also cognizant of the risk of "lesbian-*lite*," and I hope we might use "lesbian-like" playfully and wisely. Obviously, "lesbian-like" can be extended to ridiculous dimensions, by arguing, for example, that since some modern lesbians wear sandals, all sandal-wearers in past times were lesbian-like.[41] Let us stick to essentials that will allow us to construct histories that have meaning to sexual minorities today. I shall not define those essentials, for to do so would be as pointless as trying to secure the meaning of "lesbian" or "sexual minorities" or even, indeed, "history with meaning." We stand on shifting sands, but we need not lose our balance. Obviously, "lesbian-like" will overlook some lesbians in past times, particularly those who conformed to social norms. Let us remember that although "lesbian-like" can usefully broaden the field, it cannot cover it. And, obviously, "lesbian-like" speaks more about circumstance than choice; some singlewomen in pre-modern Europe willfully schemed to avoid marriage, but most found themselves unmarried thanks to poor luck, family circumstances, religious imperatives, or plain poverty. Let us appreciate the sociological uses of "lesbian-like" without endowing it with motivational meanings.

To my mind, "lesbian-like" offers not an endless set of possibilities but a set that is multidimensional, allowing any one of several criteria to call forth "lesbian-like" as an analytical tool. In playing with the possibilities of "lesbian-like," I am more comfortable applying it to *practices* than to *persons,* for most women whom I might label "lesbian-like" seem to have engaged in some lesbian-like behaviors (such as living in single-sex communities) but not others (such as indulging in sexual relations with other women). But perhaps we will eventually come to decide that we *can* call some of these women "lesbian-like"—maybe, for example, those whose behaviors evoked several criteria at once. Certainly, I would think that a woman who never married and shared an emotionally rich life with another woman might be more "lesbian-like" *as a person* than one who cross-dressed to follow her husband to war. But, then, I would call the *behavior*

[40] Greta Christina, "Loaded Words," *PomoSexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997), pp. 29–35.

[41] I am grateful to David Halperin for this example. Paul Halsall offered me another: lesbian potlucks which might lead us, *ad absurdum,* to characterize church potlucks as lesbian-like.

of the Delany sisters lesbian-like, not their *persons*.[42] Again, the sands shift; again, wise play is necessary.

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In the earliest years of the fifteenth century, a young woman—we do not know her name—disguised herself as a man and studied at the University of Krakow. Although her story has many literary antecedents, Michael Shank has argued effectively for its plausible historicity. This student maintained her male identity for two years, and when discovered, she was more marveled at than punished. Like most other discovered female cross-dressers in the Middle Ages, she was admired and rewarded for improving herself through a male persona: she became the abbess of a nearby monastery.[43] We have only two words reputedly spoken by this young cross-dresser, and they explain her decision to take on a male persona in clear and nonsexual terms. When asked why she had deceived everyone, she replied, "amore Studii" ("for love of learning").[44]

This young woman never, as far as we know, enjoyed sex with another woman, but her lesbian-like cross-dressing might be a critical part of lesbian history.[45] After all, she lived as a man for two years in one of the least private of all-male environments. The account of her deception notes that she did not frequent the baths (where male students would have gone in search of prostitutes as well as cleanliness), but it tells us that she lived in a student hostel, that she attended lectures regularly, and that she got on well with her fellow students. In other words, she likely shared beds with men, disrobed in the presence of men, urinated in their company, and somehow managed, through all this, to conceal her breasts, her menstrual blood, her genitalia. To be sure, the Krakow student had

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[42]Sarah L. Delaney and A. Elizabeth Delany, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (New York: Delta, 1993). Sarah and Elizabeth Delany, two African-American sisters well known not only for their memoir but also for the play and movie produced from it, provide a deliberately provocative example. I am not accusing the Delany sisters of incest, nor am I suggesting that they were lesbians. I am suggesting, however, that in both their singleness and their emotional partnership, the Delany sisters behaved in ways that offer affinities with modern lesbian behaviors and that are, therefore, lesbian-like.

[43]The exception to positive treatment is, of course, Joan of Arc, once she fell into the hands of the English. Yet since she cross-dressed but never hid her female sex, she is an exception in other ways too.

[44]Michael Shank, "A Female University Student in Late Medieval Krakow," *Signs* 12:2 (1987): 373–380. Shank notes that this might just be a literary tale, but he also adduces good evidence to suggest its historicity.

[45]Unlike modern scholars who have readily linked cross-dressing with homosexual or lesbian practices, most medievalists have rejected or avoided this link. In a recent article on

some important assistance in her deception: she moved to Krakow from northwest Poland, ensuring that she was unknown to anyone in the city; her parents had died, freeing her from familial supervision; and she had a small inheritance, giving her some financial independence. Still, if she could pass as a man in what was one of the most male and most sociable of medieval surroundings, might not other medieval women—motivated by love of women rather than love of learning—have managed to do the same? The medieval world was much less private than our own, but there were many more private surroundings than a student hostel. The story of the Krakow student can, in other words, help us to think in new ways about possibilities for lesbian expression in the Middle Ages. After all, her story describes a society that tolerated or even encouraged female cross-dressers who "improved" themselves by becoming men; it reminds us that some medieval women found themselves—through migration to cities, parental death, or both—relatively free of familial control; and it even encourages us to consider the possibility that medieval households could readily accommodate—in their much more private circumstances than those provided by student hostels—married couples in which the husband was a cross-dressed woman.

At about the same time that this unnamed Krakow student was first donning men's clothing, Laurence, the sixteen-year-old wife of Colin Poitevin, sought a royal pardon from her prison cell. She told a story of how, some two years earlier in her small town of Bleury (near Chartres), she had been seduced by Jehanne, wife of Perrin Goula. The two had walked out to the fields together one August morning, and Jehanne had promised to Laurence that "if you will be my sweetheart, I will do you much good." As Laurence tells it, she suspected nothing evil, acquiesced, and suddenly found herself thrown onto a haystack and mounted "as a man does a woman." Orgasm followed, certainly for Jehanne, but perhaps also for Laurence who enjoyed herself enough to desire later encounters. In subsequent days and weeks, Laurence and Jehanne had sex together in Laurence's home, in the vineyards outside their village, and even near the communal fountain. But eventually, the affair ended—and violently so, when Laurence's efforts to terminate the relationship caused Jehanne to attack

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medieval cross-dressing, Vern Bullough argues vigorously against a link between cross-dressing and homosexual practices. Vern L. Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Changes in the Middle Ages," in Bullough and Brundage, *Handbook,* pp. 223–242. Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland, 1996) similarly underplays lesbian possibilities (see her brief discussion, pp. 113–114). For a different view, see Crane, "Clothing."

[46] In European courts, women prosecuted for same-sex relations were often guilty of other antisocial offenses. See, for examples, van der Meer, "Tribades on Trial," esp. p. 439, and the case of Catharine Linck (guilty of religious inconstancy as well as same-sex relations) as reported in Brigitte Eriksson, "A Lesbian Execution in Germany, 1721: The Trial Records," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6:1/2 (1980–1): 27–40.

her. (One wonders if, as in so many other cases, it was this attack, not the sexual relationship per se, that first brought the matter before the authorities.[46]) Jehanne's fate is unknown; Laurence ended up in prison, whence came the document that today tells her version of their encounters.[47] To us, the behavior of both women is readily labeled lesbian-like, for this explicit story of sexual relations can make them seem much more resolutely "lesbian" than, for example, the cross-dressing of the serious—and seemingly celibate—student of Krakow. Yet even such clear-cut cases of same-sex relations are not transparent. Laurence cast her plea for clemency in terms as familiar as they were successful; she was a good woman, regretful of her sin, and a victim of an unnatural aggressor. Laurence, who was allowed to return home, reputation secured, after six months in prison, had indulged in a behavior with affinities to modern lesbianisms, but it would be crude to identify her as a "lesbian" or even as a lesbian-like *person.*

A few decades before Laurence and Jehanne first dallied in the fields outside of Bleury, the city of Montpellier merged its two convents of ex-prostitutes, probably because, in the wake of the Great Plague, both houses had fewer inmates than before. The regulations of one of these communities suggest that it served, as Leah Otis has put it, "a social more than a religious purpose." The sisters were not cloistered; they performed modest religious duties; and they could, for all practical purposes, leave whenever they wished. Their house was directed by city officers who sought to encourage orderly behavior among some of the more disorderly inhabitants of Montpellier, but it also served the purposes of the women themselves, charitably sustaining some prostitutes in old age, sheltering others who were truly repentant, and providing a transition for still others who used it to move from work as prostitutes to work as wives.[48] The prostitutes and ex-prostitutes of Montpellier were lesbian-like not only in their transgressive sexual practices but also in their joint living, whether in a city-sponsored brothel or a city-sponsored convent. The "historical sisterhood" between prostitution and lesbianism has been explored for modern times, particularly in a wide-ranging essay by Joan Nestle, but it seems to have escaped the recognition of historians of premodern Europe. Bernadette Brooten has let pass with little comment the semantic association of *hetaira* (Greek for 'courtesan') with *hetairistria* (a word used by Plato and others for same-sex female love). John Boswell has dismissed as a "convenient derogation" a twelfth-century monk's description of same-sex female relations as an

[47]The excerpted text can be found in Charles du Fresne du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis* (Paris: Didot, 1844), vol. 3, pp. 663–664, s.v. "hermaphroditus." I am grateful to Phillipe Rosenberg for his help in reading this text. I have not consulted the full letter (found in Archives Nationales de France, JJ 160:112), but have relied on Edith Benkov's summary of its content. See her forthcoming "The Erased Lesbian."

[48]Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), esp. pp. 73–75.

innaturalem prostitutionem.[49] And in their excellent books on medieval prostitution, neither Leah Otis nor Ruth Karras has been able to explore the relationship between female sex work and female same-sex relations.[50]

At the same time that the ex-prostitutes of Montpellier were settling into their new community, a widow in Ferrara amalgamated her dowry funds with contributions from other women and purchased a substantial property. Bernardina Sedazzari's intention, she claimed, was to establish a female monastery that would fall, as required by the Church hierarchy, under the supervision of a male order. But, in fact, it is likely that Sedazzari never intended to submit her community to ecclesiastical control. As Mary McLaughlin has put it, Sedazzari preferred "autonomy to authority," cagily preserving the independence of her foundation for nearly two decades, and governing about a dozen companions in a regular regime of religious devotions, good works, and common living. When Sedazzari died, she named one of those companions, Lucia Mascheroni, as her "universal heir," having extracted from her a sworn promise to maintain the community as it then existed. For more than two decades, Mascheroni observed this promise with "obsessive fidelity."[51] Sedazzari was a strong-willed woman, a pious woman, a woman experienced in both monastic life and marriage, and a woman who in midlife made a lesbian-like decision to avoid the governance of men—either that of the ecclesiastical hierarchy or that of a second husband. Sedazzari expressed her hopes for her community in pious terms, and we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of her words. But in an age that celebrated female chastity, piety might also have been the medium through which resistance to marriage could be most acceptably—and most effectively—expressed. The distinction between piety-as-motivation and piety-as-explanation might have often blurred in the minds of women who avoided marriage, but as Sedazzari's story suggests, it merits further study. For her, piety provided not only a way to avoid remarriage but also a method of sidestepping ecclesiastical control (that is, male control) of her holy household.

At the time of the unnamed student in Krakow, Laurence and Jehanne, the prostitutes of Montpellier, and Bernardina Sedazzari, there were several million adult women in Europe who had never married. A few were nuns, but most lived in the secular world, seeking work, shelter, and companionship as "singlewomen," the term by which they were known in early fif-

[49]Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1987), pp. 157–177. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 4–5. Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, p. xxix, n. 31.

[50]Ruth Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 185, n. 9, reports that she has found one "shred of evidence" linking prostitution and lesbianism, but she dismisses it as a clerical error on p. 175, n. 67. Both Otis and Karras discuss how prostitution was socially tolerated, in part, because of anxieties about male same-sex relations.

teenth-century England. In England in 1377, almost one-third of all adult women were single; in Florence fifty years later, singlewomen accounted for about one-fifth of women; and in Zurich fifty years after that, nearly half of all women had never taken a husband.[52] Many of these women eventually married, for especially in northern and western parts of Europe, traditions of late marriage left many women single well into their twenties. From their early teens until the time of marriage (that is, for ten, fifteen or more years), these women were accommodated within contemporary structures of adolescence, service, and apprenticeship. Some singlewomen, however, never married, and in late medieval England and perhaps elsewhere, these lifelong singlewomen accounted for about ten percent of the adult female population. Whatever their sexual or affective practices, these single-women—those who never married and those who eventually did; those who chose to avoid marriage and those who sought it without success—were lesbian-like in their never-married state. Singlewomen lived without the social approbation attached to wifehood; most lived without the support offered by the greater earning power of a male; and some lived independently, an anomalous state among people who sometimes thought that "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil."[53]

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The Krakow student; Laurence and Jehanne; the prostitutes of Montpellier; Bernardina Sedazzari and her sisters; the singlewomen of late medieval Europe. Instead of isolating a mere handful of women prosecuted for same-sex contact, "lesbian-like" might move lesbian history from deprivation into plenitude. "Lesbian-like" is not a perfect term: it adds new jargon to our field; it is as impossible as "lesbian" to define precisely; it highlights deviance more than conformity; it stresses circumstances over motivations; and if over-used, it might even create a lesbian history that lacks lesbians (however defined). Yet, "lesbian-like" might offer two critical uses for lesbian history. First, it can add nuance to behaviors that we might too readily identify as lesbian, for the experiences of women like Laurence and Jehanne are surely more lesbian-like than lesbian. Second, it can add many sorts of

[51]Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Creating and Recreating Communities of Women: The Case of Corpus Domini, Ferrara, 1406–1452," *Signs* 14:2 (1989): 293–320.

[52]For these and other demographic estimates of the presence of singlewomen, see Maryanne Kowaleski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 38–81, and 325–344.

[53]I have taken this quote from a reprint of the 1928 translation of the 1486 handbook for witch-hunting by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. Montague Summer, trans., *The*

behaviors to the historical study of lesbianisms: cross-dressing; pious autonomy from male control; singleness; monastic same-sex community; prostitution; unremarried widowhood. Each of these practices shares affinities with contemporary lesbianisms, and insofar as lesbian history, like all history, plays with the interplay between past and present, these lesbian-like behaviors are arguably as important as sexual practices. The sexual pleasures and legal difficulties of Laurence and Jehanne are notable parts of lesbian history, but so too might be the appropriation of male prerogatives by the Krakow student; so too the sexual disorder of Montpellier's prostitutes; so too Bernardina Sedazzari's resistance to male authority in either marriage or monasticism; so too the social and economic marginality of medieval singlewomen.

If we strategically appropriate all these sorts of behaviors under the rubric of "lesbian-like," lesbian history can look very different. Again, the Middle Ages provides a good example. The approaches of intellectual historians and cultural critics have suggested that the Middle Ages were either indifferent toward lesbian practice or hostile to it. A social history that includes not only Laurence and Jehanne but also the Krakow student, the Montpellier prostitutes, the community founded by Bernardini Sedazzari, and the never-married women of medieval Europe might draw a different picture. Social approval of manly women; tolerated regulation of prostitutes; religious practices that accommodated considerable female autonomy and female community; a world that abounded with single–women, old as well as young. All these suggest that, although medieval elites were perhaps indifferent or hostile toward lesbian practices, medieval society might have generally been, in fact, filled with possibilities for lesbian expression. But whether we end up with histories of medieval lesbianisms that stress hostility or possibility, "lesbian-like" might help provide the sort of histories that modern lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and queers seek from the past. "Lesbian-like" can allow us to imagine in plausible ways the opportunities for same-sex love that actual women once encountered, and it can allow us to explore those plausibilities without asserting a crude correlation between our varied experiences today and the varied lives of those long dead. In the process, of course, we might understand ourselves better, for through exploring likeness, resemblance, and difference with past times, we might better understand the fraught interplay of identity and non-identity in our own lives.

History is not just, of course, about understanding the present through the past; it is also about understanding those who lived before us—and un-

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Malleus Maleficarum (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), p. 43. The Latin reads: *Mulier cum sola cogitat, mala cogitat.*

derstanding them in respectful ways that take full account of past historical circumstances. Do we understand the Krakow cross-dresser (who loved learning, not women), or medieval prostitutes (whose sexual disorder might often have sprung from poverty, not desire), or medieval nuns (often celibate and solitary), or never-married servingwomen (most of whom eagerly sought marriage) if we think of some of their behaviors as lesbian-like? Certainly, many of these women would not have recognized themselves as "lesbian-like" in any way.[54] Certainly, their lives included intellectual, religious, social, and economic concerns that cannot be reduced to a matter of sexual object choice.[55] And just as certainly, we can benefit from pondering the lesbian-like possibilities of their histories.

Consider, for just one example, the singlewomen whose never-married state has prompted me to incorporate them under the rubric of lesbian-like. No doubt, many singlewomen never enjoyed sex with other women, but "lesbian-like" might nevertheless help us view them more clearly. Singlewomen have usually been seen through a heteronormative lens—and therefore seen as pathetic, sexless, and lonely failures in a game of heterosexual courtship and marriage. If we use "lesbian-like" to put aside this distorting lens, we can discover that, although singlewomen might have often been pathetically poor, their lives were not devoid of either sexual possibility or emotional richness. Many singlewomen were sexually active, and since procreative sex was problematic for the not-married, singlewomen might have particularly engaged in forms of sexual pleasure that easily accommodated partners of either sex. Similarly, although singlewomen lived without husbands and (often) children, their emotional lives could be quite full—and woman-identified. Some lived together in what demographers have dubbed "spinster clusters"; many congregated in specific neighborhoods or streets; most worked in occupations—as servants, spinsters, lacemakers, laborers, or hucksters—that brought them into daily contact with more women than men; and many had close female relatives and

[54]For discussions of this issue in another context, see: Leila J. Rupp, "'Imagine My Surprise': Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America," reprinted in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past,* ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), pp. 395–410; Estelle B. Freedman, "'The Burning of Letters Continues': Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality," *Journal of Women's History* 9:4 (1998): 181–200. Self-identification is, of course, important, but it is not determinative. In these cases and others, the term "lesbian-like" might provide a compromise between respecting the self-identifications of these women and rejecting their own homophobic, elitist, and racist ideas about what a "lesbian" was.

[55]For a fascinating example of lesbian sexuality understood as incidental by the women so involved, see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "'But We Would Never Talk About It': The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928–1933," in *Inventing Lesbian Culture in America,* ed. Ellen Levin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 15–39.

friends with whom they shared life's sorrows and joys.[56] If we do not use "lesbian-like" to see singlewomen in new ways—if we do not thereby startle ourselves out of our own heterosexist assumptions—we might continue to interpret their lives, as did Gerda Lerner, as "distorted and unhappy."[57] In this sense, "lesbian-like" is shock therapy for a women's history—modern as well as medieval—that not only has long overlooked lesbian possibilities but also has resolutely defined "women" as "heterosexual women."[58]

"Lesbian-like" will not yield real-life lesbians in past times; it will not help us identify every past instance of same-sex relations; it will not address motivation as much as situation; it will not resolve the definitional dilemmas that both plague and enrich the term "lesbian"; and if used as a blunt instrument, it will produce blunt results. But if used in playful, wise, and careful ways, "lesbian-like" can address difficult problems that now confront lesbian historians, on the one hand, and women's historians, on the other. In helping us imagine possibilities and plausibilities that have hitherto been closed off from lesbian history, "lesbian-like" can expand the purview and evidence of lesbian history. And in encouraging us to see past societies in more complex ways, "lesbian-like" can promote the writing of women's histories that are less hindered by heteronormative blinders, sexist ideologies, or modernist assumptions. As a new way of thinking about the past, "lesbian-like" might both enrich lesbian history and reform women's history.

[56] Bennett and Froide, *Singlewomen*.

[57] Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, p. 179.

[58] Cheshire Calhoun, "The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance under the Sign 'Women,'" *Feminist Studies* 21:1 (1995), pp. 7–34.