3. Queer Desire and Heterosexual Consummation in the Anchoritic Mystical Tradition

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Queer theory and medieval mysticism are both extremely elusive concepts, and both seem, in spite of a growing critical emphasis, to defy formal definition and control. Critics who use queer theory understand it in a variety of ways; in fact, one could argue that it is this multivocality among queer theorists that (although often frustrating to those who seek to understand it) keeps it queer; that is, critics' failure to fully know it reinscribes its ultimate unknowability and usefulness as a mode of both intellectual and political inquiry. Medieval mysticism is not any more clearly definable in that, although we who study it think we know what it means (an encounter with the transcendent presence of the Divine), its very nature makes that transcendent moment ineffable, and thus outside of both theological and critical discourse. In spite of the difficulty with knowing either fully, it is my intention with this paper to look at the commonalities between queer theory and mysticism, in an effort to illuminate the ambiguities of both.

Alicia Solomon and Paisley Currah define queer theory in their introduction to *Queer Ideas* as a “theoretical framework that unsettles binaries, seeks to explode the formation of fixed categories or norms, and works to reexamine the direction of the arrows between cause and effect [that] challenges the way knowledge production is domesticated and made subservient to hegemonic cultural norms” (11). While this definition serves as a solid beginning point for an examination of queer theory, it seems important (in the context of this study) to examine medieval approaches to the subject, as well. Carolyn Dinshaw, in her book *Getting Medieval*, points out similar distinctions and problematizes any examination of sexuality in relation to medieval culture: “the analysis of same-sex sexual relations, even as they cannot be clearly distinguished from opposite-sex sexual relations, implicates such relations in a larger confusion of the natural and the unnatural (that binome that would seem so clear in medieval discourse) and thus suggests that determinate oppositional structures are not going to hold very well in analyzing medieval sexual discourse” (II). Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger, in *Queering the Middle Ages*, also look at both acts and their analysis by arguing that queer theoretical thinking suggests that “effects are often constructed after the fact as essences, origins, and causes— with the human subject itself, for instance, being an effect of a psychic process that is retrospectively misrecognized as the cause of interiority” (12–13). In his recent book, *Queering Medieval Categories*, Tison Pugh approaches a definition of queer from the perspective of action and classification when he writes: “sexual acts position one another either inside or outside the realm of the heteronormative, and cultural assumptions about the meanings of various acts thus lead to classifications of the people who engage in such acts” (1). Pugh cites Michel Foucault who defined sexuality according to various binaries, including “licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” (qtd. 1) with the obvious logical step that that which is queer resides in the categories of illicit and forbidden. Karma Lochrie wisely reminds us that “the distinctions that are made in the Middle Ages never prove so clear-cut as we think they are, nor so intrepid as we sometimes claim them to be in our queer studies” (“Presidential Improprieties” 91). Theodora Jankowski, addressing queer notions of Renaissance virginity writes: “I use the term ‘queer’ not only to define varieties of nonheterosexual activity, but also to define nonproductive heterosexual and nongenital activity” (6). All of these contributions to my understanding of queer theory and its application to medieval studies have assisted me in defining it as I have in what follows, but perhaps it is Ed Cohen, not a medievalist, but one who defined himself (in 1989) as “an openly gay man writing and teaching about the historical articulations of gender, class, age, and nationality” (162), who best expresses my take on the raison d’être for queer theory. Cohen sees what he does as a critic and a scholar very simply. He writes: “we fuck with categories” (174–75).
I.

In her *Getting Medieval*, Dinshaw addresses what she sees as the “unspeakability” of queer history. She does not deny that critics are attempting to speak of such history now, but rather argues that, as with most issues of sex and, at least for the medieval audience, unnatural acts (acts “aynes kynde” as Dinshaw defines them), until the application of postmodern criticism it has been impossible to speak (perhaps due to our own lack of understanding of Otherness) of that which we now seek to understand as queer. This unspeakability is a shared quality for that which is queer and that which, at least in terms of medieval language and understanding, is transcendent, more specifically, the transcendence of the mystical experience. Elsewhere I have argued that the mystic (whether biologically male or female) is feminized in the experience of transcendence in mysticism. It is my argument that the Otherness of the mystic extends beyond any construction of femininity and can be seen as queer, that is, beyond traditional categories of sexuality and gender; just as Monique Wittig sees the lesbian as “beyond the categories of sex (woman and man),” (“One Is Not Born a Woman” 53). I see the mystic beyond these simple categories, as well. In part this is due to her position as both sexualized and chaste: chaste in her experience and sexualized in her awareness of herself in relation to earthly men and to Christ. Such sexualized chastity is problematic, but not unique in the works of medieval mystics. Both lover and virgin, sexualized and chaste, the mystic is thus part of the heterogenous and indeterminate queerness described by Dinshaw (and by other recent queer medieval critics) and, through the language that is most often used in mysticism, equally representative of heterosexual patterns of desire.

Medieval mysticism is simultaneously spoken and unspeakable; deeply felt and inaccessible; transgressive and orthodox; queer and heterosexual. The mystic must recount to her audience an experience that she herself cannot fully understand. Mystics often speak of being silenced in the presence of the divine and yet knowing and being known fully in the encounter. Julian of Norwich, for example, describes what she considers to be “the unspeakable passion of Christ,” and yet she endeavors, even though it can’t really be known, to express this passion in her *Shewings*. She writes

For just as he was most tender and most pure, so he was most strong and powerful to suffer. And he suffered for the sins of every man who will be saved; and he saw and he sorrowed for every man’s sorrow, desolation and

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Julian’s description here of the “sweet manhood” of Christ refers to a paradox of desire as it is so often expressed in medieval mysticism: the medieval mystic’s expression of erotic desire for Christ may (sometimes) be queer, but most often its nature is expressed using the heterosexual language of marital union (*brautmystik*) and consummation. The Otherness of the mystic makes her queer, but she is left with the phallocentric language of desire, indeed the only language that her culture permits her to use in expressing that desire.

Mysticism is first and most importantly an alternative means of expression. It is the expression of that which, like the semiotic (and the poetic) has been made silent and wordless by the Symbolic Order; the mystic is always one who is different. My reading of mysticism situates the mystic outside of the established order of the Church in much the same way the theories of French feminism situate the poetic writer outside of the Symbolic Order: both the mystic and Hélène Cixous’ writer of *écriture féminine* write from and about that which is immanent, rather than that which is established by the Word of patriarchy. The focus of much of my own research has been the late twelfth and early thirteenth century anchoritic texts associated with *Ancrere Wisse*, texts often examined together in what is called the Wooling Group. Anchoritic writers can be characterized by their sense of isolation from the Christian community—in some ways, a self-imposed exile; their sense of urgency with respect to union with the Divine through worship and contemplation; their isolation from others and their avoidance of human contact in favor of Divine union. While its proponents include Bernard of Clairvaux, whose theology is ruled by the idea of Divine love, the central metaphor for anchoritic spirituality is an abjuration of self and of human existence through asceticism of both mind and body.

Anchoritic mysticism is queer in ways that other forms of mystical expression are not, in part because of the extreme isolation of the anchoress (or anchorite in the case of a man) in her anchorhold, an enclosed residence attached to a medieval church which would provide her both sensual and cultural isolation, and because she was viewed in her own time (and clearly in ours) as simultaneously subject and object, One and Other, enclosed and exposed. Dinshaw’s definition of the heterogenous nature of
queer history provides a means of understanding the anchoress as both within and outside of social and theological control, something not achieved by any other member of medieval religious culture. The anchoress is both one who participates in the patriarchal culture of the Middle Ages and one who resists that culture. She follows a strict rule of behavior prescribed for her by a male mentor; she is chaste; she is expected to spend her time in prayer, in contemplation, and in silent reflection — speaking to no one, touching no one (including herself), and looking upon nothing but the altar and her own sinful soul. At the same time she expresses her desire quite openly, using erotic and often extremely sensual language to describe her love for Christ and her own experience of divine transcendence. In the texts associated with the Wooing Group, Christ takes on both the masculine and the feminine, the abject and the empowered, and through a transference of gender identity, allows the feminine speaker (and reader) to reach beyond her state as culturally defined, oppressed feminine object and attain a sense of transcendent subjectivity.

II.

In *On Losong of Ure Lauerde*, the descriptions of Christ fluctuate from line to line with images of his death interspersed with images of his immortal life:

May the strong streams and the flood that flowed from your wounds to heal humanity clean and wash my sinful soul. Through your five wounds, opened on the cross, driven through and sorrowfully filled up with nails, heal me, sorely wounded with deadly sins through my five senses [Savage and Watson 326].

This passage is a good representation of what occurs for the speaker(s) of the Wooing Group during the mystical experience. They begin as sinful, fallen, penetrated female bodies who are eventually brought to the glory of the resurrection through Christ’s fallen and resurrected body and through the intellectual exchange that takes place during the moment of transcendence. Central to their understanding of the potential for their spiritual perfection is the knowledge and understanding of their own physical and earthly abjection. Once they surrender to that notion of their own physical inadequacy and sin, they are enabled to reach beyond the body and participate in the wordless, body-less experience of mysticism.

The question of subjectivity — of the reader and of the speaker of the poem — is important here; how does the subjectivity of the feminine speaker develop — after all, as a woman it is subjectivity that the speaker of the texts is most emphatically denied by her culture. The mystic is non-traditional, unorthodox, and cannot be understood in the conventional sense of patriarchal experience; thus she cannot be completely defined by the standards of orthodox tradition, whether it is a tradition of theology or literature. The mystic (particularly the anchoritic mystic, such as the apparent audience of *pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*) is unique (queer) within her culture because of her role as a disruptive force within it. She stands within a culture which oppresses and silences the Other, yet, because of her exchange with the Divine through her mystical experience, she will not be silenced.

Julian of Norwich, an anchoress and a mystic, again provides an illuminating example. In her work, she cannot settle on the traditional, patriarchal image of God when she seeks to describe him. She expands that image to include the masculine and the feminine:

And so in our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord. And in the joining and the union he is our very true spouse and we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased ... I saw and understood the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord [Showings, Long Text LVIII: 2391–2409–11].

The love of God is both the father and the mother; Christ is his spouse, and the Christian is simultaneously his wife and a “fair maiden.” Julian cannot narrow her focus to one gender or erotic category in her definition of the love of Christ any more than the mystic can be narrowed into one category (male/female, queer/heterosexual) by her audience, be it medieval or modern.

In *pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, for example, the speaker identifies herself with the abject, feminized, crucified Christ and celebrates his willingness to offer his kindness and love, even in his state of abjection. Within these works, the abject (Christ’s, the mystic’s, even the reader’s) is feminine — and that which is feminine within a culture controlled by phallic power, being Other, is always already queer. Throughout the text the speaker describes his brutalized body, emphasizing the most demoralizing and abject moments of Christ’s passion. In spite of this suffering, it is his endurance of such abjection that motivates her love:

For against all the misery and the shame that you suffered, and against all the sorrow and the painful wounds, you never opened your mouth to
complain. And still you meekly endure the shame and the misery the sinful
of the world cause you every day [Savage and Watson 250].

At the same time, the speaker argues the proof of her own love is her devotion
to Christ who, for the duration of the poem, is imagined during the Crucifixion:

for often many a woman loses her honor through the love of a man of high
birth. Then, sweet Jesus, upon what higher man can I set my love? Where
can I choose a nobler man than you, who are the Son of the King who rules
this world [Savage and Watson 250].

She takes it for granted that, as a woman, she is likely to be sexually com-
promised by a man; so why not choose the best of men for that compromise
and seek the role of bride of Christ10 (or perhaps, as this quotation
seems to imply, sexual object of Christ): sexual contact with a great man
provides her access to some of that greatness.11 The anochiotic mystical
works provide a number of powerful sexualized images of both Christ and
the female speaker: images of heterosexuality which queer the text because
of their excessive sensuality. Indeed, in *pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, there
is an image of the brutalized queer Christ:

you were stripped, bound fast to the pillar, so that you could in no way
flinch from the blows; there you were beaten with knitted whips for my
love, so that your lovely body could be all torn and rent [Savage and Watson
245].

Christ is beaten, penetrated, and submissive to phallic power in this almost
voyeuristic image described by the speaker of the poem. Indeed, the
queered body of Christ in these texts has been examined elsewhere, par-
cularly with reference to Christ’s wounds and his flowing blood12 and
their symbolic resemblance to the vagina and menstrual blood.13 This is
reinforced later in the poem when the speaker reflects on Christ’s wound:

Ah! That lovely body, that hangs so pitifully, so bloody and so cold. Ah!
How shall I live now? For now my love dies for me on the dear cross ... He
pierces his side, cleaves that heart. And out of the wide wound comes
flowing the blood that bought, the water that washed the world of strife and
of sin. Ah! sweet Jesus, you open your heart to me, so that I may know it
inwardly [Savage and Watson 255].

The experience of the anochiotic mystic, witnessing — in fact, as a speaker,
enacting — this eroticized disempowerment of the Divine, is an example of
how the Otherness of mysticism extends beyond what has traditionally been
viewed as merely Other; her reflection upon Christ as her own beautiful
heterosexual lover and simultaneously as a broken, bleeding (though no
less beautiful) victim problematizes the nature of desire throughout these
texts, making the speaker (and Christ) not merely feminine or Other in
their abjection, but queer.

The paradoxical images of Christ in majesty, which the speaker sum-
mons as she looks upon the broken and bloody body of Christ as he dies
upon the Cross, brings to mind the possibility that her love lifts him out
of his state of abjection into his state of risen glory in the same way that
his love brings her through abjection into salvation. Thus abjection, while
a fairly clear characteristic of mysticism, at least in some mystical texts,
seems to provide a sense of subjectivity which the mystic might otherwise
not have. And because the mystic cannot otherwise have a sense of sub-
jectivity within traditional patriarchal codes of meaning, she must be seen,
at least to some degree as queer, because queerness is also characterized
by exile, Otherness, and a lack of recognition and subjectivity within the
Symbolic Order.14

Thus she is set apart from her culture intellectually and theolog-}
ically, as well as physically (through her convert or anchorhold). The mystic,
then, is queer, not simply because she is Other but also because her Ot-
erness acts disruptively in the presence of the patriarchal culture that
oppresses her. Her text is disruptive for a number of reasons. The text itself
is also exiled, in that it exists outside of orthodox devotional writing —
that is, mysticism is isolated from traditional literary genres. It is a sepa-
rate genre in the same sense the mystics themselves are separate from the
cultures in which they exist — in much the same way that Wittig argues
that lesbians are separate from other women.15 Thus, since it cannot be
defined based on what already exists within traditional readings of medieval
literature, particularly medieval poetry, then mysticism must be seen as
Other, and, as I have argued, its use of language and metaphor makes it
not only Other, but disruptive and unsettling. As such, the genre itself
queers the canon — it stands in opposition to traditional, patriarchal
notions of literature and works to subvert that tradition on many levels:
its means of subversion include, for example, feminine authorship and
readership, the almost exclusive use of the vernacular, and erotic and abject
language and imagery. In the Katherine Group, for example, dated to
approximately the same period and anchoitic audience as the Wooning
Group and Ancienre Wisse (late twelfth century), the life of Saint Margare-


complain. And still you meekly endure the shame and the misery the sinful of the world cause you every day [Savage and Watson 250].

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The experience of the anchoritic mystic, witnessing — in fact, as a speaker, enacting — this eroticized disempowerment of the Divine, is an example of how the Otherness of mysticism extends beyond what has traditionally been viewed as merely Other; her reflection upon Christ as her own beautiful heterosexual lover and simultaneously as a broken, bleeding (though no less beautiful) victim problematizes the nature of desire throughout these texts, making the speaker (and Christ) not merely feminine or Other in their abjection, but queer.

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Thus she is set apart from her culture intellectually and theologically, as well as physically (through her convent or anchorhold). The mystic, then, is queer, not simply because she is Other but also because her Otherness acts disruptively in the presence of the patriarchal culture that oppresses her. Her text is disruptive for a number of reasons. The text itself is also exiled, in that it exists outside of orthodox devotional writing — that is, mysticism is isolated from traditional literary genres. It is a separate genre in the same sense the mystics themselves are separate from the cultures in which they exist — in much the same way that Wittig argues that lesbians are separate from other women. 15 Thus, since it cannot be defined based on what already exists within traditional readings of medieval literature, particularly medieval poetry, then mysticism must be seen as Other, and, as I have argued, its use of language and metaphor makes it not only Other, but disruptive and unsettling. As such, the genre itself queers the canon — it stands in opposition to traditional, patriarchal notions of literature and works to subvert that tradition on many levels: its means of subversion include, for example, feminine authorship and readership, the almost exclusive use of the vernacular, and erotic and abject language and imagery. In the Katherine Group, for example, dated to approximately the same period and anchoritic audience as the Woolling Group and *Ancerne Wisce* (late twelfth century), the life of Saint Margaret is recounted. Margaret, a chaste Christian, is threatened with rape and torture by the pagan king Olibrius if she will not marry him and renounce her Christianity. In the narrative of her martyrdom, she is beaten, stabbed,
strangled, drowned, burned, swallowed by a dragon, and imprisoned. She survives all of these violations, smiling and singing the praises of her true spouse, Jesus, and it is only when she is decapitated (something she requests of her torturer) that she dies. When he is threatened with violence by Olibrius, for example, she replies:

I will submit my body to every kind of suffering that you can contrive, however hard it may be to bear or endure, as long as I may have the reward that virgins receive in heaven. God died for us, the beloved Lord, and I am not afraid to suffer any kind of death for his sake. He has set his mark on me, sealed with his seal; and neither life nor death can divide us again [Seinte Margarete 55].

Surely her delight in her torture on behalf of her love for Christ, her jouissance, reinforces the abject nature of anchoritic mysticism and the queer nature of desire in these works: Margaret rejoices in her abjection as it reveals her faith and brings her closer to her ultimate consummation with Christ, a consummation she, as a virgin, could not permit with her earthly body but which she longs for in her soul. The scholars I quoted earlier define that which is queer based on both erotic acts and sexual identity, and it is clear that the anchoritic mystics (and the audiences of their texts) are queer in just these kinds of ways—they commit queer acts, think queer thoughts, speak a queer language, and even embrace what we can now understand, perhaps, as a queer identity.

III.

In this article I have sought to bring together two elusive concepts, queer theory and medieval mysticism in order to expose the simultaneously transcendent and transgressive nature of the mystic: earthly and esoteric; sensual and chaste; queer and heterosexual. Mysticism is, above all else, the record of an event that is both wordless and bodyless, and yet it must always (at least for the kinds of texts that I have thus far examined) be expressed using words and the body. Thus a central paradox of mysticism may not be a question of how we apply gender or theories of sexuality to its authors, speakers, or audiences. Ultimately the paradox of mysticism is how something so anti-linguistic can be expressed in language at all — and that aspect of mysticism may be above all what makes it so compelling. So while I have intended to use the heterogenous nature (as defined by Dinshaw) of queer theory to understand the mystic, I must end by admitting that the mystic has ultimately helped me to understand the queer. As Karma Lochrie has pointed out, those who study both queer

and medieval topics have to account for several cultures of inscription and phallogocentrism: medieval studies, critical theory, and now even the growing institutionalization of queer theory itself. She writes:

Queer medieval scholarship might begin to question the whole grid of "heteronormativity" that we have so consistently used to delineate the queer ... the current absurdity of heterosexuality, however, calls attention to its recent "invention," and should force us to reconsider whether it is historically accurate or even wise to assume a heteronormative grid for the Middle Ages against which we define the queer [Lochrie 95].

Current critics may be limited by our own often inaccurate assumptions about the past; but, as Lochrie points out, it is important to assume that they are just that, assumptions. Instead of using such categories as queer/straight, transgressive/orthodox, female/male to define the always unknowable mystic, perhaps it is not the unknowability that we should use to inform our understanding of those categories. As Ed Cohen has argued:

... to the extent that we can transform our eccentricities into our strengths, utilizing our "off-center" positions to challenge the concrete institutional arrangements whereby the "center" is both defined and produced ... we can create the possibility for interrupting these defining practices even as they reiterate our specific marginalities [175].

Rather than creating (however unintentionally) an institutionalization of queer theory as a category of critical inquiry, perhaps, like the mystic, the queer theorist should speak the unspoken and engage the unknowable in a language that only she fully recognizes, remaining aware, always, of the failure of language to fully express human desire.

Notes

1. Dinshaw defines queer history as focusing "on sex as heterogeneous and indeterminate, even as it recognizes and pursues sex's irreducible interrelatedness with other cultural phenomena ... a queer history, not denying the desire for some sort of recoverable past, attempts to provide ... an account of the production of knowledge that seeks as well to account faithfully for the 'real'" (Getting Medieval 13-14).


3. The problematic nature of medieval virginity has been addressed recently by several critics. See Medieval Virginities, ed. Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans (Wales 2003); Maud Burnett McInerney, I Am No Woman But a Maid: The Rhetoric of Virginity from Thecla to Joan of Arc (Palgrave 2002); Sarah Salih, Versions of
11. I expand on this notion of the woode (the mystic) turning the tables and wooing Christ in these works elsewhere. See Carlson and Weisl, 118-21.

12. For a discussion of the penetration of Christ in Chaucer, see Michelle M. Sauer, who writes “the many ways Christ’s body can be consumed and permeated allow for multiple passionate, gratifying, and ultimately homo-erotic, unions with the Savior, unions that would be either passive or active” (“Cross-Dressing Souls” 171).

13. See Luce Irigaray, “La Mysterique”: “a wound could be sacred? Ectasies in that glorious cleft where she cools up as if in her residence, where she reposes as if at home and He is in her as well. Bathing in a warm blood and purifying in his generous flood” (200). See also Amy Hollywood, who locates the relationship here between Christ’s wound and “the features of the female flesh” as supporting a “specifically feminine subjectivity” (200). I would argue that rather than merely feminine here, the body of Christ is queer, while still enacting heterosexual desire and consumption.

14. See Ed Cohen, “Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming” who recounts his own experience as a gay man and a queer theorist (in a period before the term queer had been applied to critical discourse), commenting that Other sexual identities “have historically been excluded from intellectual inquiry” (172).

15. Because of the time in which Monique Wittig wrote her major works, such as “The Straight Mind” and “One Is Not Born a Woman,” and perhaps because of her own personal experiences, she emphasizes lesbian identity and only goes as far as that metaphor will allow her in her depiction of what we now, twenty-five years later, would call queer. Her position in history prevents her from using the language of queer theory, and although I find her metaphors of Otherness extremely useful in my own understanding of queer theory, I should point out here that when I read lesbian in her works I generally interpret it as not limited to same-sex desire among women but, rather, as queer desire.

16. As Leo Bersani writes: “We desire what nearly shatters us, and the shattering experience is, it would seem, without any specific content—which may be our only way of saying that the experience cannot be said, that it belongs to the nonlinguistic biology of human life” (40).

### Works Cited


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78. I. Imperfect Sodomy and Queer Chastity


5. Trans. Colledge and Walsh 211-12. Due to limited space, Middle English quotations will be printed in Modern English translations.

6. There is no space here to describe all the means by which the mystic expresses his desire and love for Christ in traditional heterosexual language: the nature of *bromhystik* alone has been defined and described by a number of critics and scholars in recent decades. Beginning with Bernard of Clairvaux, in fact, it was expected and encouraged for Christians, male and female, to describe their love for Christ in such terms. The co-existence, however, of such language and imagery with the queerness of the mystic within her culture makes her an appropriate subject for this study.


10. Denis Renevey examines the notion of mystical love and desire in his book *Language, Self, and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the Song of Songs*. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2001. Renevey examines love from a variety of perspectives, emphasizing the metaphorical treatment of the erotic imagery in the Song of Songs as “carnal imagery’s transference from the field of physical love to that of the spiritual” (77).


