This series aims to present developments and debates within the field of medieval religion and culture. It will provide a broad range of case studies and theoretical perspectives, covering a variety of topics, theories and issues.

1 **Gender and Holiness**
   Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe
   *Edited by Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih*

2 **The Invention of Saintliness**
   *Edited by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker*
10 Ecce Homo

Robert Mills

I saw, standing in front of the altar... an image of the Lord Saviour. As I was in deep contemplation, I recognised the crucified Lord himself crucified in that very place and I beheld him, living, in my mind's eye... I took hold of him whom my soul loves, I held him, I embraced him, I kissed him lingeringly. I sensed how gratefully he accepted this gesture of love when, between kissing, he himself opened his mouth, in order that I kiss more deeply.

O my god, o my lute! in-to me writhe with þi charite þeryld [enter into me, pierced with thy charity], with þi bewte wounded; sclyde doune & comforte me heavly [descend and comfort me heavily]; medecyn, to me wrecche, to þi lufer schow þysel, behald, in þe is all my desyre, & all my hert sekis. To þe my hert desyres; to þe my flesch is fyrst. Hayle þerfor, o luful lute werylastynge, þat vs rayces fro þet lawe þinges, & with so of raustrialnyng to þe sight of godis maiestes vs representys. Cum in to me, my leman [lover].

it often comes to pass that, in their very spiritual exercises, when they are powerless to prevent it, they arise and assert themselves in the sensual part of the soul impure acts and motions, and sometimes this happens even when the spirit is deep in prayer, or engaged in the Sacrament of Penance or in the Eucharist. For when the spirit and the sense are pleased, every part of a man is moved by that pleasure to delight according to its proportion and nature.

'Ecce Homo! Behold the man! Behold the... homo? What did it mean for a twelfth-century Germanic monk to envision himself embracing the crucifix and indulging in a bout of passionate 'French kissing,' for a fourteenth-century English hermit to imagine lusting after his beloved Saviour's 'bewte', or for a sixteenth-century Spanish visionary, situated squarely in the medieval mystical tradition, to recount scenes of young monks at prayer with erections? To many of today's readers the passages quoted above are striking, some might say shocking. They are remarkable first because of their supreme eroticism - which, for all the frequency of its occurrence in certain strands of medieval devotional literature, still retains the univalved capacity to offend the sensibilities of the pious in sacred contexts - and second because all three are alluringly homoerotic - written by men, about men, for men, evoking desires amorously directed towards images of a barely clothed male deity. How are we to account for the unabashed frankness with which the spectre of male–male love rears its potentially subversive head within the confines of Christian orthodoxy, a location more usually thought of as offering pale shelter to the transgressive, the perverse and the queer?

It is worth bearing in mind, of course, that the vision of Rupert of Deutz in the opening epigraph - suggestive though it is - repeats a familiar trope in monastic literature. Pinocchio-like tales of crucifixes shuddering to life in order to address or even embrace their beholders frequently formed the basis for a quasi-conversion narrative in which the young initiate discovered that he had been called to a deeper understanding of Christ's mysteries, giving vent, even in the most traditional contexts, to images of men kissing and hugging fast. Whereas St Francis was simply said to have seen Christ speak 'from the wood of the crucifix,' Herbert of Torres, recounting the miracles of St Bernard, describes a 'certain monk' known to him who once found the blessed abbot Bernard in church alone in prayer. While he was prostrate before the altar, a certain cross was visible there depicting the crucifixion, placed on the floor in his presence. The most blessed man was worshiping it devoutly and kissing it warmly. Furthermore the Lord himself, with arms separated from the ends of the cross, seemed to embrace the same servant of God and to draw tight to him.

Indeed, a manuscript illumination illustrating an edition of the Manuel des Péchés (Fig. 10.1) figures the convention quite literally as two men locked together in an intimate embrace, suggesting the extent to which such imagery was deemed perfectly acceptable in sacred contexts. But for all the conventionality of their immediate context, is it possible that such metaphors might also have been read, in the Middle Ages as today, in queer, counter-hegemonic ways? Should we dare to pose the hermeneutical question 'what if?' and in its answering raise the spectres of queerness and perversity in relation to sacred symbolism?

Our chief problem is that a culture of hesitancy - even chastisement - militates against making queer readings of Christian imagery plain and explicit, particularly in the context of fantasies of the 'medieval' and more so again when those fantasies are articulated under the auspices of the academy. (Though they are, of course, sporadically sanctioned in the realms of the individual psyche, the popular and the profane - a fleeting recognition of the correlation between Christian denial and masochistic narratives of suspension in psychoanalytic theory, a muttered whisper in a gallery or tastefully framed comment in a survey of 'erotic art' when confronted with the image of a seductively dressed saint, or even the outrageous presentation of a gay Christ-like figure in a controversy-laden, fatwa-prompting drama.) A case in point would be the pronouncements of Caroline Walker Bynum, whose work commands a central position in projects of rehabilitating the body as a subject for intellectual scrutiny in medieval cultural studies. Richard Rambuss and Karma Lochrie have already rehearsed the main elements of criticism in this respect, and
the point of what follows is not simply to engage in another bout of ‘Bynum-bashing’ (though her work’s centrality and near-canonical status does lay it open to close interrogation). Nevertheless, I think it is worth, at the outset, reciting once more the phobic underbelly to such strands of historical writing as an example of the ways in which queer possibilities continue to be checked, censured and circumscribed in even the most purportedly ‘liberal’ contexts.

**Bynum and the ‘problem’ of homosexuality**

Bynum, like many medievalists, owes a major methodological debt to the ideology of context. ‘We can only’, she counsels, ‘read the texts in context (i.e., with other texts among which they belong both chronologically and by self-ascription)?’—though, as she simultaneously admits, ‘no one of us will ever read more than partially, from more than a particular perspective’. Consider those texts ‘written and preserved and read together’, she argues, and the past becomes not knowable as such but at the very least recountable. Indeed, for Bynum, contextual analysis constitutes what she terms ‘a new voice or a new mode in history writing: the partial or provisional voice, the comic mode’.

So far so good – there is, after all, a degree of promise in the proposition that we ‘find comic relief in the human determination to assert wholeness in the face of inevitable decay and fragmentation’, akin to Eve Sedgwick’s formulation of ‘reparative’ reading practices in the processes of constructing queer subjectivity, Carolyn Dinshaw’s narratives of connectivity and community formation, or even Scott Bravmann’s call to engage in the dynamic rhetorical performances that he labels ‘queer fictions of the past’.

In one of the essays that follows these pronouncements – which comprise the introduction to her well-received *Fragmentation and Redemption* collection – the mutinous promise that we will discover ‘compromises and partialities and improbabilities’ is, however, undergirded by the recommendation that certain partialities and improbabilities are unlikely in medieval contexts. The essay in question is Bynum’s celebrated response to Leo Steinberg’s controversial *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, a piece of writing that, as Steinberg himself laments, has been ‘widely assigned as required reading to neutralise mine’. (Though, as I will demonstrate in due course, the gap between both critics is not necessarily, as the latter believes, ‘unbridgeable’, given that each promotes in their own way a decidedly unpervious Christianity – they can, at least, hold a conversation with each other on that score.) Reflecting on Steinberg’s thesis that we look at the spaces in Renaissance religious painting where we are not supposed to look – to the Christ-child’s groin, to his deliberate acts of self-exposure (the ostentatio genitalium), his penis and its fondling by ageing relatives, the homage paid to it by the Magi, the folds of the mature Christ’s loincloth insinuating phallic tumescence – Bynum submits:

Did medieval people immediately think of erections and sexual activity when they saw penises (as modern people apparently do)?... It is impossible to prove that medieval people did not assume what we assume when we look at pictures.

And we clearly see breasts and penises as erotic. But let me at least suggest that we would do well to be cautious about projecting our ways of seeing onto the artists or the views of the past.

Bynum’s basic point is a good one: that modern commentators reflect on their own stake in probing ‘the sexual’ in medieval art and culture. But the statement poses problems too, stemming first and foremost from the collectivisation of ‘medieval people’ as psychically and libidinally distinct from the ‘sex-obsessed’ inclinations of ‘we moderns’. This reproduces a familiar disjunction between past and present that, as Žižek suggests, paradoxically preserves the fetishistic narrative of alterity by which ‘we avoid calling into question our own position, the place from which we ourselves speak’. In other words, by subscribing to the much wider tradition of urging historicist ‘caution’ – the methodological imperative always to historicise...
that protects medieval studies from the encroachments of non-specialists and dissenting 'presentists' – Bynum happily reproaches critics like Steinberg for not considering their own interpretative stance while remaining immune to such accusations herself.

What I find problematic in Bynum’s account is not that she questions the 'generality' of modern sexual inquiries as such, but that she chooses to seize upon contemporary concepts of homosexuality – that 'modern disease,' traditional figure for all things different, diverse and perverse – as the main example in support of her vision of radical medieval alterity. ‘Despite recent writing about “gay people” in the Middle Ages’, she pronounces, referring to the work of John Boswell, 27

it is questionable whether anyone had such a concept. To medieval theologians, lawyers and devotional writers, there were different kinds of sexual acts – between people of different sexes, between people of the same sex, between people and animals – and all had some kind of taint attached. But there was no clear notion of being one or the other kind of sexual being. 28

Evoking, as such, the bare bones of the long-standing ‘social constructionist controversy’, 29 Bynum neatly underscores the epistemological gap between past and present (without, it should be added, interrogating the foundational categories, such as the ‘maternal’, implicit in her own analysis of medieval gender relations). 30 Rather, she goes on to offer an example that would not look out of place among the epigraphs with which I opened, using it to stage a complaint about modern projections onto the sexually-innocent past:

When, for example, the medieval nuns Lukardis of Oberweimar and Margaret of Faenza breathed deeply into their sisters’ mouths and felt sweet delight flooding their members, they did not blush to describe this as receiving God’s grace or even as receiving the eucharist. Twentieth-century readers think immediately of lesbianism. 31

And why shouldn’t they? Because to think in such ways is symptomatic, to Bynum’s mind, of ‘a modern tendency to find sex more interesting than fecling, suffering or salvation’. 32 It is important to bear in mind that Bynum’s real argument is with sex – contemporary notions of gay and lesbian identity are merely the springboard from which she mounts her attack. The ultimate agenda is the promotion of what she categorises as a very medieval way of relating to the world, a nostalgic deference to notions of ‘dignity’, ‘fertility’ and ‘unavoidable suffering’ over and above the pleasures of the sexual:

[i]f we want to express the significance of Jesus in both male and female images, if we want to turn from seeing body as sexual to seeing body as generative, if we want to find symbols that give dignity and meaning to the suffering we cannot eliminate and yet fear so acutely, we can find support for doing so in the art and theology of the later Middle Ages. 33

But statements of this sort also suggest that, aside from homosexuality, Bynum’s argument regarding modern concerns with the body sexual is also established on the basis of a number of questionable assumptions concerning gender. For all the insistence elsewhere on interrogating medieval concepts of fleshliness and the body in all their protean permutations, 34 the ‘Reply to Leo Steinberg’ simultaneously engages in a somewhat reductive policing of the flesh, attempting to rein in the libidinal, the illicit and even the homoerotic with reference to what Rambuss astutely characterises as ‘a normalizing semiotics of marriage, impregnation, lactation, or food preparation: a set of terms that keeps the female body, even in its most ecstatic states, quite properly domesticated’. 35 In other words, there is more to Bynum’s claims than a simple inclination to historicise the medieval body (with a correlative distancing for seeing it as a sexualised – and, it follows, inherently anachronistic – body). Constructions of gender are crucially at stake.

This is especially apparent in relation to an earlier essay of Bynum’s, where she probes the motif of ‘Jesus as Mother’ and asks why maternal imagery was the favoured medium of expression for religious males in the twelfth century. Given the period’s predilections for metaphors drawn from human relationships, Cistercian monks, she says, ‘had a problem’:

For if the God with whom they wished to unite was spoken of in male language, it was hard to use the metaphor of sexual union unless they saw themselves as female. We do have occasional examples of monks describing what appears to us to be a sexual union with a male God. (Rupert of Deutz’s vision of embracing the crucifix is a case in point.) We also have many examples of monks describing themselves or their souls as brides of Christ – that is, as female. But another solution... was of course to see God as female parent, with whom union could be quite physical (in the womb or at the breast). 36

Bynum’s unacknowledged ‘problem’ is, of course, what Chaucer’s Parson characteristically dubs ‘thilk abhomynable synne, of which that no man unnethe [hardly] oghte speke ne write’ – that is to say, same-sex desire. 37 In order to avert the homosexual peril, Bynum implies, writers subscribed to a manifestly heterosexual model, since ‘to some extent, males seem to have been attracted to female images and women to male images’; the queer crisis to which she obscurely alludes is thus neatly resolved in relation to male mystics by regendering Christ’s body female and assuming that its feminaleness equates to a maternal, reproductive and implicitly asexual concern with ‘dependence/independence, incorporation/withdrawal’. 38

Lochrie has already looked beyond the lens of ‘presumptive heterosexuality’ and ‘interventionist gender correction’ in such scholarship in order to address the question: ‘What does it signify when a female mystic desires and adores the feminized body of Christ?’ 39 But without wishing to detract attention from this important avenue of research, could we not also risk posing the related question, ‘What does it signify when a male mystic desires and adores the (un)feminized body of Christ?’ What does it mean when religious men lust after Christ’s tortured body and desire that it hold them, kiss them, even penetrate them in return? And why is it required
that Christ’s liquefied, wounded body be understood, in accounts like Bynum’s, as ‘feminine’, ‘feminised’ or ‘becoming female’ (which seems to imply, in relation to male beholders, that religious devotion to Christ necessarily entails heterosexual object choice).40

The homoerotics of Richard Rolle’s
Incendium Amoris

The latter question is, of course, rhetorical, since an answer has, I think, already been rehearsed. The point is not that we should resist exploring the gender-troubling implications of medieval Christological imagery, but that we should recognise how (1) penetration does not necessarily entail feminisation, and (2) figurations of a ‘female’ Jesus preclude both the ambiguous promise of his tortured body and the fact that its moments of maleness may have afforded potential spaces for homoerotic modes of religious expression. To understand why this is so, let us leave Bynum aside for the moment and pursue the issue through the words of one of the religious figures cited at the outset.

The text in question is Richard Rolle’s Incendium Amoris, a work of ‘affective evangelism’,41 composed c. 1343 and distributed widely in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (both in the original Latin and in vernacular translations). In this book, Rolle advocates the relation between Lover and Beloved as the crucial framework for devotions attendant upon Christ’s punished body. The hermit’s point, first and foremost, is that to take imitatio Christi to its literal extreme is to enter into a state akin to erotic union, so that he remarks (in Richard Misyn’s ‘Englishing’ of the text, dated 1435): ‘What is lufe bott transformynge of desire in to be pinge lufy? ... All lufand to þer lufe treuly ar likkynd [All loving is truly comparable to their love], & lufe makys hym like þat lufys to þat þat is lufyd’ (1.L.8, p. 40). He then goes on to adopt as his main paradigm the union of the soul with Christ as it is figured in the Song of Songs 1:1, ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’:

[L]ufe makes me hardly [bold] hym to call þat I best lufe, þat ... he me comforhand & filand [comforting and filling] my31 kys me with kysyng of his mouth ... I beske he kys me with swetnes of his lufe refreshyng, with kysyng of his mouth me strately halsyng [embracing me tightly], þat I fayl not, & gras in puttyng [grace in allowing] þat I may besily in lufe grow.42

(I.27, p. 58)

We could first, of course, ‘desexualise’ Rolle’s fantasy, by understanding it as a metaphor (or allegory) of spiritual union and thereby downplaying its significance at eroticism. We could also easily ‘heterosexualise’ the scene by reminding ourselves that the soul in medieval representation was often gendered female (stemming from the grammatical gender of anima, its Latin correlate).43 This, though, would be to subscribe to a narrative that perceives images of queerness as ‘problems’ to be solved, rather than possibilities to be embraced. The fact that gendering the soul female provides too easy a solution is indicated by the fact that in the original Latin version of Incendium Amoris, as well as the subsequent English redaction quoted here, there is a considerable degree of confusion as to whether the soul should be understood as male or female. At one point, Rolle talks of ‘wymmen’

qwhos lufe distractis þe wytt, pervertis & overtumnes resone, wysdome of mynd to foly it channys, þe hart fro god it drawsathe, and to fends þe sawl makys bonde [the soul attaches itself to devils]. . . Bot and þow cristis lufe withoute cysyng wold cal a-gayn, and hym in all place haue in þi sight with dreid, I tron be fals chryssyng of a woman þou sult neuer be beglyld.

(I.30, pp. 65-6)

The passage is obviously striking for its virulent misogyny. Nonetheless, in this context, what is significant is that the passage is directed towards a group deemed unequivocally antithetical to women, an audience admonished to spurn the love of women in order to focus their attentions on the love of Christ. In denouncing women, Rolle implies that the endangered soul belongs to a man. Indeed, pages later, the soul’s gender is made linguistically explicit: ‘A chosyn perfor & lufe alway disirand, hym-self turnys in-to his lufe, for noother wardly substance he has nor desyres to hate [he neither has nor desires worldly goods], bot be willful pouert criste filand [following]’ (II.2, pp. 70–71; my emphasis); moreover, the lover is ‘also byrnand into vnbodily halsyng [incorporeal embracing], his wikkynynes clensyd & all bohtis vanychyd þat to þis ende goys not, with his gostely ee his leman desyrand to see [desiring to see his lover with his spiritual eye]’ (II.4, pp. 76–7; my emphasis). By gendering the lover as grammatically masculine, in the context of a grammatically male Christ, the fifteenth-century redactor has merely translated the Latin nouns ‘Electus’ and ‘Amator’ literally,44 and as such we can hardly impute Misyn himself with queer intentions. Yet what we are left with are lines in which a male lover is overtly represented as the woer of a linguistically male Christ.45

I am not the first to call to account the representational queerness of Rolle’s imaginings: Brad Peters, similarly citing the Incendium Amoris (in modern English translation) in an essay on Rolle’s ‘eroticised language’, submits: ‘Christ’s love finds expression and functions divinely in the gap between the homoerotic metaphor and the human reality it represents. The male reader remains behind, in the place where more conventional passions and temptations reside.’46 Yet although, according to Peters, we would do well not to ignore the rhetorical impact of such passages upon male bodily identity, we are subsequently advised that it is to the implications of Rolle’s erotic metaphors on his pastoral approach to women in his English writings that we should ultimately direct our attention (despite the fact that the Latin Incendium Amoris, as internal evidence indicates, seems to have been written for a primarily male audience). Peters consequently writes of the ‘unexpectedly feminized psychodynamic of spiritual identity’ that attends to Rolle’s visions, conveniently heterosexually – like Bynum – the homoerotic excess with reference to the rhetorical breakdown of male identity as a way of placing men and women on ‘common redemptive ground’.47
To speak of ‘feminisation’ in such terms is potentially, however, to engage in a process of simple reversal that effectively reinforces the gender binaries that it supposedly calls into question. The gendered assumptions behind Peters’s analysis are clear: describing a passage in which Rolle recounts his experiences with a group of women, he remarks that feminisation is the result of ‘rebukes from the women who are his objects’, ‘impotence’ and ‘the inert nothingness of a man whose attributes are merely beautiful and lovely’. But rather than repeating the equation of femininity with impotence, inertia and sexual objectification, perhaps we should instead take heed of Rambuss’s insistence that ‘we avoid peremptorily re-encoding every representation of the penetrable male body as feminized because penetrated’, and also ask what the masculine stake is in positions of fleshliness, passivity and penetration. Perhaps we should also recall, as Rambuss does, that male bodies, too, have orifices. Rolle, after all, keeps positions of penetration fundamentally in play in the *Incenditum Amoris*, presenting the soul’s relationship to Christ as simultaneously ‘penetrated’ and ‘penetrating’. At one point, we are told:

> behald in hym & see sault se his godly hede with borson crownyld, his face bespittyd, hys full fayr eyn be paysns wan [his beautiful eyes dulle by pain], hys bak scourgyld, his breste hurti, hys worpi handis birlyd [pierced], hys swesty syde with a spere woundyd, hys feyt borow naylyd [his feet nailed through], & woundis sett borow al hys soft flesch

(I.28, p. 61)

recalling a passage in one of the Middle English passion meditations customarily ascribed to Rolle, where Christ’s tormented body is likened to a dovecote ‘ful of holys [full of holes]’. Yet in another description, it is Christ himself who wounds:

> Truly ðou seis ðat whikly [to the quick] I am woundyd with fayr bewte, and longynge releisys not bot grows more & more, & pavenlyses [spiritual anguish] here present me down castis & prikkis to go to þe of qwhome onely I trow solos & remedy I sal sec.

(II.5, p. 78)

The centrality of Christ’s tortured body as a site of voyeuristic exploration in such images, and the perceived homology between wound (*sultus*) and vagina (*sultus*) in comparable works like James of Milan’s *Stimulus Amoris*, are facts frequently remarked upon in medieval scholarship, a line of reasoning that accords well with contemporary feminist theories of the heteronormative ‘male gaze’ where the objectified, fetishised female body becomes the snare for male scopic attention. Michael Camille, adopting this paradigm in order to interpret an image in the Rothschild Canticles depicting a nun pointing a lance towards the wound in Christ’s side (Fig. 10.2), remarks, rather prescriptively: ‘Only by becoming a female body was it possible for God to become the focus of an erotised gaze. . . . The gaze still only goes in one direction, towards the female Christ from the male–female’s phallic sphere.’ This does not, however, detract from the ways in which Christ’s tormented body in verbal and visual representations remains at the same time perplexingly male – if, at least, we are permitted to understand the use of the gender-specific pronoun ‘hym’ as harbouring some of its originally intended signifying value and visual images of anatomically male bodies as retaining some kernel of maleness (which is certainly not to undermine Bynum’s perception that certain depictions might also ‘suggest another sex for Christ’s body’). Looking at the folios in the Rothschild Canticles again, could we pose an alternative interpretation? The image illustrates the Song of Songs 4:9, ‘Thou hast wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse’, and, as Jeffrey Hamburger perceptively notes in his survey of the manuscript, in representing the moment after Christ’s side has been pierced, the illuminator actually makes the preceding event more immediate – so that the focus is the act of wounding rather than the wound itself. That is to say, it is not an unambiguously ‘female’ body of Christ on fol. 19 that is the focus of the gaze, so much as the penetrating transaction that occurs across the folios between Christ and *spousa*. Importantly, moreover, Christ appears in the image as the ‘agent’ in his own passion, holding in one hand the whip of flagellation and in the other hand the nails with which he was fastened to the cross. As such, agency is distributed across both halves of the image, an ambiguous and indeterminate gendered performance that renders attempts to conceive it in terms of binaries and ‘role reversals’ highly problematic. Camille
argues that "the woman's masculine role as bearer of the phallus is what makes her vision possible" – a turning of the tables that does, indeed, have potentially subversive implications. But that does not mean to say that Christ himself becomes completely "feminised" in the process or that holding a spear remains inherently "masculine": we should resist reproducing normative gender paradigms in our efforts to describe the image. The probable owner of the manuscript was, as Hamburger insists, a woman, most likely a nun or canoness. As he himself admits, however, the case for female ownership is "hardly conclusive": nor should we forget that the "audience" of medieval manuscripts not only extended to their eventual owners but also to the compiler, the scribes and the artists.58 Thus, as Flora Lewis suggests, such imagery is not necessarily alien to male circuits of devotion and indeed

if we again consider the similarity of the bodies of the naked virgin [in an image later in the manuscript] and Christ, and the sponsa holding her spear, it is clear that the image enables a male viewer to imagine himself as a penetrating sponsa, piercing the naked and sexually indeterminate body of Christ.59

Given that essential indeterminacy, could such images also have provided a space in which male devotees were able to explore metaphors of sexual union with a God imaginatively gendered male? Rather than simply subscribing to heteronormative models of voyeuristic response and gender binaries – where the body of Christ signifies at any one time only as this or that gender, depending on the current gender dispositions of the mystical devotee – we should instead recognise the degree to which positions of power and powerlessness in Christian discourse are in a state of perpetual circulation, the very mobility of which creates spaces for the excessive, transgressive and pervasively erotic.60 Thus, the passage cited earlier, in which Rolle describes Christ's perforation of the lover, no doubt recalls the familiar trope in courtly love literature of the lover who, gazing upon the object of his desire, casts himself as victim of the (female) beloved's beauty,61 and we might well want to follow the traditional line of reasoning that casts Rolle's words in an unproblematically heteroerotic mould. Then again, we might not.

The sexuality of Christ in Renaissance art:
Steinberg with Bynum

The point of the above analysis is not to force Rolle to 'come out' gaily from his homosocial "prayer closet",62 nor do I wish the writings of medieval mystics simply to stand in for my own queer tendencies and desires (the attendant risk in any attempt at historical queering). What I would like to advocate is a gesture in the direction of a hermeneutical exploration of medieval representation that resists the 'flattening, overly normalizing metaphors of unvariegated heterosexuality'.63 Perhaps art historians could themselves learn from such a manoeuvre. As my analysis of the Rothschild Canticles folios showed, visual images of the tortured body of Christ and the saints are not devoid of the capacity to signify erotically, or even homoerotically. Certainly the medieval ideal was to rise above the corporeal contemplation of images and, according to writers like St Bernard, images were not the ultimate goal of spiritual meditation.64 But that does not mean that viewers always, then or now, perceived representations in terms of those ideals. In 1402, Jean Gerson, bishop of Paris, wrote a treatise on the 'corruption of the youth' in which he implored secular and religious authorities to institute laws against the sale of dirty pictures. At one point he laments 'the filthy corruption of boys and adolescents by shameful and nude pictures offered for sale at the very temples and sacred places', demonstrating the perceived complicity of the sacred and the erotic in Christian representation in the later Middle Ages. Similar anxieties are expressed by Bernardino of Siena, the notorious fifteenth-century Italian preacher, in his treatise De inspirationibus. Warning of the dangers of viewing human flesh in sacred art, even the flesh of Christ himself, the preacher complains: 'I know a person who, while contemplating the humanity of Christ suspended on the cross (I am ashamed to say and it is terrible even to imagine) sensually and repulsively polluted and defiled themselves.'65 By the sixteenth century comments of this sort had become commonplace in the context of Lutheran religious upheaval. Erotic responses to images of female saints are well documented in the writings of German iconoclasts,66 reformers like Zwingli likewise reproved the sexual arousal elicited by images of male religious.67 The sixteenth-century Council of Trent, indeed, decreed with respect to the veneration of relics and the sacred use of images, that 'all superstition shall be removed, all filthy quest for gain eliminated, and all lasciviousness avoided, so that images shall not be painted and adorned with a seductive charm'.68 Sexuality is not, as Bynum imagines, something we moderns simply 'read into' the texts and images of times past – regulations like these bear witness to the zeal with which authorities attempted to read it out.69

Tridentine ordinations did not, on the other hand, problematise the kissing of visual images of Christ's body,70 despite the fact that manuscript illuminations of the crucifixion literally worn away by years of repeated oral adoration attest to the widespread popularity of the practice.71 This is not to suggest that the kissing of the crucifixion image by the officiating priest as part of the daily service was in itself especially transgressive or even perceived as such by most participants. Rather, I am proposing that in some contexts – certain visualisations of the sponsalia Christi, for example – we reverse the terms of the question and ask not, "To what extent does Christian representation self-consciously depend on a homoerotic subtext?" (though that may well be a valid question to ask in certain cases, especially where sources become available)72 but, "How might queer subjects have deployed potentially homoerotic Christian imagery to their own perversely libidinal ends?"

In order to begin to debate this question it would be worth looking once again at the images reproduced in Steinberg's The Sexuality of Christ. One of the objections to Steinberg's book (coming from Bynum, among others)73 is that its title is misleading since it concerns Christ's 'genitality' rather than his 'sexuality'. I have no argument with Steinberg on that score, since it is evident that the book's subject is 'not the penis but the enigma of its ostension',74 and that the ostentatio genitalium is being read as 'the projection upon Christ of a sexuality which in him – in him as in the First Adam anterior to sin – exists without guilt'.75 But it is worth pointing out that Steinberg's characterisation of Renaissance art as orthodox and accepting of Christian tradition
nonetheless closes down the act of looking by rehabilitating it wholly within the sphere of religious orthodoxy. According to Steinberg’s interpretation, the presentation of Christ’s privy parts signifies above all else the humanization of God; it thus represents a quite conventional offshoot from the incarnational aesthetic that was so dominant in the period’s sacred representational codes:

And because Renaissance culture not only advanced an incarnational theology . . . but evolved representational modes adequate to its expression, we may take Renaissance art to be the first and last phase of Christian art that can claim full Christian orthodoxy. Renaissance art – including the broad movement begun c. 1260 – harnessed the theological impulse and developed the requisite stylistic means to attest the utter carnality of God’s humanization in Christ.77

Steinberg thus curtails readings of Renaissance art that see it as representative of anything but ‘the theological impulse’. Perhaps the images in Steinberg’s corpus that have caused most offense to modern sensibilities are those depicting an ithyphallic Christ (Fig. 10.3).78 This is odd when one considers that the author initially situated the pictures in question within the context of ancient cults of the phallus in Roman and Egyptian mythology, thereby suggesting that the erect phallus’s participation in resurrection symbolism for a brief period in the sixteenth century was conceived with ‘a Christian will and de profundis’ as ‘the body’s best show of power’79 . . . and then in a later revision rejected the ‘resurgent flesh’ explanation in favour of another, even more orthodox (Augustinian) line of reasoning: that the erection motif represents Christ’s incorrupt nature by implying that he is in command of all his bodily faculties.80

At the risk of offending Steinberg’s critics further, might it not be worth asking whether the images that he himself interpreted in decidedly unerotic terms did in fact have the potential to signify erotically or even homoerotically? Richard Trexler has uncovered convincing evidence that ‘from early Christianity onward a powerful reason for keeping the crucified Jesus covered at the crotch was the danger that he would seduce other males’.81 Craig Harbison suggests that debates over the nakedness of Christ in sixteenth-century Germany ‘corresponded to a latent homoeroticism’ in devotional practices.82 Yet at the most basic level replies to the question remain speculative, even wishful. There are plenty of mystical visions and images that attest openly to the erotic valences of devotional desire, but there are no medieval texts and images, to my knowledge, that explicitly perceive visions of Christ’s body under the sign of the sodomitical.

If, on the other hand, we are to take seriously Sarah Beckwith’s invitation that we see religion as an ‘insistently this-worldly activity, a set of structuring practices and processes in which human relationships, sexual, social, symbolic, are invested’,83 it is imperative that we recognise the ways in which Christ’s body was a fundamentally ambivalent symbol, invested with both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic significance. We need, as she puts it, ‘terms of reference beyond the theological’.84 As it happens, Beckwith’s arguments ultimately centre on the ways in which images of Christ’s suffering are the ‘very means by which order and authority are created’,

Figure 10.3 Maertan van Heemskerck, ‘Man of Sorrows’, 1532.
Source: Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten. © IRPA-KIK, Brussels

a symbolic order in which ‘retrospectively defined catholicity and protestantism play out their tropes and struggle for cultural capital’.85 I do not intend to expand on such an analysis in the present context. The point I wish to make is that we might interrogate Christ’s tortured body as a ‘vital cultural resource for those who sought legitimacy within their culture’,86 perhaps in an entirely different sense from the way in which Beckwith – presumably – wished those words to be understood.

There are hints that we might at least keep an eye out for the articulation of what I have elsewhere theorised – after Simon Gaunt – as ‘queer wishes’ in relation to religious representation (even in as unlikely a place as Christological passion
imagery). The example I offer is one that Steinberg himself cites in the revised edition of his book. It appears in a letter of remission for one Guillaume Caranda, a young barber living in 1530 in the town of Senlis, France. The letter describes how Caranda, ‘on the day of the holy Sacrament of the Altar just past’, had acted the part of Jesus in the tomb, ‘in record and representation of his holy resurrection’. That evening, Claude Caure, the local toolmaker, approached Caranda in passing, exclaiming:

‘I see the god on earth. Did you keep your virile and shameful member stiff in playing God?’, uttering these dishonest words arrogantly and against the honor of Christianity. To which the supplicant responded that ‘his was neither very hard nor heated up, and that he [Caure] was gelled’, and after these words he and his company went on their way.99

Greeting the barber once again upon his return with the same ‘dishonest words, insulting to our Lord Jesus Christ and to the holiness of the day’, Caure proceeded to start a brawl. Caranda stabbed the aggressor in self-defence, the latter died, and the former fled in fear. A few weeks later, Guillaume Caranda was granted an official pardon.

Steinberg interprets the episode as proving his point that there was, in this period, a ‘ready-made association’ between phallic and resurgent flesh.30 But surely, without wishing to downplay the explanatory force of this example in the context of the ‘res-erection’ images Steinberg cites, other interpretations are possible. Could it not also be the case that the episode demonstrates an awareness of the notion that the humiliating stance of the suffering Jesus might, in itself, be potentially erotic? Is it possible that the ensuing brawl was the result of accusations of perverse desire attendant in the toolmaker’s words and the barber’s allusions to castration (effeminacy/sodomy) in his reply?91 That offence was caused suggests something more was at stake than Christian orthodoxy, a discursive excess that could not be reined in by theological doctrine alone. Here is an example of the degree to which Christ’s body ‘makes meaning for its practitioners and interlocutors’,92 in ways that clearly implicate cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality as much as theological doctrine.

Art historians are reluctant to look for eroticism in religious contexts: Anne Hollander suggests that the nude image of the crucified Christ in art was usually kept from being overloaded with erotic significance by the ‘force of its devotional meaning’ (though she does go on to label St Sebastian ‘the outstanding example of the emphatically sexy saint’),93 and Camille, discussing statues of St John the Evangelist asleep in the Lord’s bosom, rules that it ‘would be anachronistic to project homoerotic desires onto the makers and users of this image, who were for the most part nuns’.94 But we might take heed of Rambuss’s advice, in relation to medieval as well as early modern systems of representation, that

we need to be wary of overplaying the hegemonic within the space of religious devotion, a space with its own heterotopic possibilities: a space, as we have seen, where the sacred may come to traffic with the excessive and the transgressive, even the otherwise culturally illicit.95

If Bynum is reluctant to admit the erotic as a meaningful corporeal category in relation to medieval Christian devotion, and Steinberg smuggles in the erotic only under the sign of extreme religious orthodoxy, a new analytical framework would involve understanding the ways in which passion iconography is and always has been a potential site of scandal. It is a site that, as Sedgwick shrewdly remarks, retains more than ever its transgressive force in that ‘efforts to disembowel this body, for instance by attenuating, Europeanizing, or feminizing it, only entangle it the more compromisingly among various modern figurations of the homosexual’.96 Modern though these figurations arguably are, we should not, I think, ignore their medieval shadows.

Notes
1 Rupert of Deutz, De gloria et honore filii hominum super Matheum, ed. H. Haacke, CCCM 29, Turnhout, Brepolis, 1979, book XII, pp. 382–83. Rupert was born c. 1075 in or near Liége and died in 1129; the passage in question was written c. 1125–7, but recalls a vision the author had as a young man in his twenties. For a more conventional contextualisation of the episode than is offered here, see J.H. van Engen, Rupert of Deutz, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, pp. 50–2.
4 So much so that the above-quoted episode from St John of the Cross was excised from certain editions and translations: see R. Rambuss, Closet Devotions, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 97.
5 Engen, Rupert of Deutz, p. 50.
7 Herbert of Torres, De Miraculis, PL 185, col. 1328.
9 The most explicit example of opposition to queer Christological response remains the case of blasphemy brought by Mary Whitehouse, in 1977, against Denis Lemon, editor of the British publication Gay News, for the publication of James Kirkup’s poem ‘The love that dares to speak its name’, which describes a Roman centurion interacting sexually with the dead body of Christ. This was the first successful blasphemy trial in fifty-five years; the British public is still not allowed to see the offending poem. R.H. Gorstline, ‘Facing the Body on the Cross: A Gay Man’s Reflections on Passion and Crucifixion’, in B. Kronordorfer (ed.), Men’s Bodies, Men’s Gods: Male Identities in a (Post-)Christian Culture, New York, New York University Press, 1996, pp. 125–45, is one of the notable exceptions to the general rule of academic silence on the matter of

10 The paradox in some of his [Christ's] sayings resembles the most subliminated form of the impression which we generally derive from the phenomena of masochism'; T. Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, trans. M.H. Beigel and G.M. Kurth, New York, Grove Press, 1941, p. 347.


12 I am thinking here of T. McNally's *Corpus Christi: A Play*, New York, Grove Press, 1999, which depicts the path of Joshua, a young gay man, on his spiritual journey from modern-day Corpus Christi, Texas, to ancient Jerusalem. He is portrayed as a Christ-like figure and crucified as 'King of the Queers'. In response to the production at the Pleasance Theatre, London, in 1999, the London-based Islamic fundamentalist group Al-Muhajiroun issued a fatwa against the playwright, reportedly handing out circulars outside the theatre in which the Prophet Mohammed was quoted as saying, 'Whoever insults a messenger of God must be killed.'


17 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 25.


29 See on this J. Boswell, *Categories, Experience and Sexuality*, in E. Stein (ed.), *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*, New York, Garland, 1990, pp. 133–73, which defends the use of terms such as 'gay' with the retort that since, in Latin, there is no word for religion – the term religio having a meaning quite different from the modern English 'religion' – this does not mean that we should assume that there was no 'religion' in Rome.

30 For an assessment of the 'foundational categories' implicit in Bynum's work, see Biddle, *The Shock of Medievalism*, p. 138.

31 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 86.


33 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 117. Gordin's questions whether it is, in fact, desirable to identify with symbols that promote the 'dignity' and glorification of suffering: 'The effect of imaging Jesus as lord and Saviour who died in a burst of bloody glory to save us all from sin serves the interests of patriarchs and their church to the exclusion of, and damage to, the lives of ordinary people, especially those who are oppressed by sex, race, or class'; Gordin, *Facing the Body on the Cross*, p. 143.


35 Rambuss, *Close Destinations*, p. 3.


38 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 163.


42 The Song of Songs also forms the basis for another of Rolle's Latin meditations, the *Super Canticum Canticum*, a lengthy exposition of the first two-and-a-half verses. The text is only available in an edition in thesis form; E.M. Murray, 'Richard Rolle's Comment on the Canticles', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1958; for an analysis of the text, with extensive citation, see Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, p. 147–59.

See, for instance, The Incendium Amoris, chap. 32, p. 235 and chap. 34, p. 243. The twenty-century English translation of the Latin text by Wolters interestingly mirrors its fifteenth-century precursor in neglecting to rein in the queer potentiality of these lines, describing an 'elect soul' who transforms himself into his beloved's soul, p. 144, and a lover who 'strains with all his might to gaze upon his beloved,' p. 152.

As Tredter asserts, disputing the notion that a so-called covered Christ precludes eroticism and gender ambiguity, 'Heaven does have gender'; Tredter, 'Gendering Jesus Crucified,' p. 117. For another example of male-to-male devotion in English mysticism, see Nicholas Love, Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, ed. M.G. Sargent, New York, Garland, 1992. This describes the ecstasy experienced by the 'one person [person] ba knowe now leyng & pereuanture [perhaps] bere bene many bat I knowe not,' when touched by the touch of Christ: 'ale þe membres of þe body bene enflaumed of so deable & so jollent a hote bat þe man þenk sensibly [perceives in his senses] alle þe body as it were melting for ioy as waxe doh anentes [before] he hotte hire. . . . A lorde Juest in what delectable paradise is he for bat tymne þat þus felte þat blesede bodily presence of þe . . . as he were ioyned body to body?,' p. 154. For a queer reading of the text, in relation to the erotics of eraticus/devotion, see Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, pp. 82–3.

The term employed by Rambuss to describe the closeted expression of Christian devotion in early modern literature, a 'space where the sacred may touch the transgressive, even the profane'; Closet Devotions, p. 135. On the inappropriateness of the closet as a metaphor for describing premodern sexualities, see A.J. Frantzen, Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998, pp. 3–5, p. 13. As Frantzen himself admits, however, by the mid-eighteenth century 'secrecy and concealment' had indeed become attached to same-sex acts -- suggesting that the 'epistemology of the closet,' in Sedgwick's formulation, may provide a helpful paradigm for exploring late-medieval sexualities after all.

See also the opening epigraph for another example of the metaphor, in which Rolle asks to be 'with his bewte wounded', book i, chap. 3, p. 7.


The archetypical example of which would be Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Screen, 1975, vol. 16.3, pp. 6–18.

The elliptical example of which would be Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Screen, 1975, vol. 16.3, pp. 6–18.
on the Cross, Christ naked all over without a covering expose the most abstruse and secret parts of his body for human eyes to see", quoted in Trexler, ‘Gendering Jesus Crucified’, p. 113.


70 Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, p. 97.

71 *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, p. 216.

72 Camille, ‘Obscenity under Erasure’, p. 141 and fig. 2.

73 See, related to this point, J.M. Sałow, *Gaynemed in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Sence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, which suggests that biographical/psychological modes of criticism, aimed at uncovering the intentional ‘homosexualisation’ of *Gaynemed* in Renaissance art, provide an important dimension to our knowledge of the meanings he embodied. For a critique of approaches of this sort, see A. Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1997, especially pp. 26–32. Solomon-Godeau prefers to employ concepts of ‘homosociality’, unconscious meaning and cultural mentalité.


75 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, p. 327.

76 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, p. 365; as such, I disagree with Rambuss’s argument on this score in *Closet Devotions*, p. 44.

77 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, pp. 70–1.

78 For a detailed explanation, spelling out precisely why paintings like that reproduced in Figure 10.3 depict Christ with an erection discernible beneath his loincloth, see Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, pp. 313–14.

79 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, p. 89.

80 Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, pp. 323.


86 Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, p. 117.


91 Discussing the late fifteenth-century English moral drama *Mankind*, for instance, Garrett P.J. Epp suggests that by this period ‘effeminacy’ and ‘sodomy’ had become virtually interchangeable terms; Epp, *The Vicious Guise: Effeminacy, Sodomy, and