

Brilliant Constellations: History in the Presence of the Now

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IT IS INDEED A PLEASURE and an honor to comment on Carolyn Dinshaw's provocative and evocative book *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Drawing from an unusually wide range of materials, Dinshaw constructs a brilliant constellation. Like the configurations in the sky on a starry night, this constellation relies upon imaginative relationships to make sense of the faraway: here it is a matter of how the texts, concepts, categories, and moments in time touch one another. Each chapter involves a set of juxtapositions. To tantalize those who have not yet read *Getting Medieval*, to touch and not to touch figure prominently throughout the book as something of a refrain. In her own words, Dinshaw touches "on traditional religious instruction for parish priests, ringing accusations of sodomy among heretics as well as among orthodox Christians, the possibly quite wily deposition of a male transvestite prostitute, the ostensibly heterosexual fellowship of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, and the energetic verbal sparring of Margery Kempe, all in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, alongside obscure archival work of Michel Foucault, the culture wars in the late twentieth century in the United States, and sodomy in the 1994 blockbuster movie *Pulp Fiction*."¹

While linking the discourses on Lollard heresy and the accusation of sodomy in late medieval England, a fusion of sorts, may be the *matière* of the book, the analysis is by no means constrained by geographical or historical boundaries. Essential to the analysis, to the political implications, and to community building are the recognition and representation of the indeterminate nature of medieval cultural phenomena. Reading *Getting Medieval* provided a number of reasons to recall Rey Chow's passionately held view that "it is only through thinking of the 'other' as sharing our time and speaking to us at the moment of writing that we can find an alternative to allochronism."² Although Dinshaw's theoretical assumptions

¹Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 2.

²Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between East and West* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 33.

are explicitly informed by the works of Foucault, Bhabha, Barthes, and Spivak, they function as points of departure for the construction of an entirely original theoretical perspective.

There are many possible readings of *Getting Medieval*, but for whatever that variety, Dinshaw invites her readers to touch upon their own pasts as and in the present. I found this exercise especially useful. My training as a medieval historian was essentially traditional. I was taught to believe that with good philological background and rigorous archival work I could, with a fair degree of accuracy, reconstruct the context of past lives. I recall that whenever I delivered papers at conferences, there was a palpable comfort when I made assertions about historical context of the texts. I even recall enjoying that sense of authority. But, things have changed. Now the notion of context as a given is consistently challenged. Many, perhaps even most, of my colleagues recognize and regard context as a creation of our own interpretive strategies and just as much in need of explanation as the events we call history.³

My reading of Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* is framed by a methodological conundrum that continues to shape my work, namely, how do I write about the daily lives of historically situated women without dissolving particularity into some solitary faceless Ordinary Other, privileging the abstract in anonymity, cutting out certain details, turning them over in my hands, and taking or mistaking the parts for the whole? In this regard, I was especially touched by the chapter "Margery Kempe Answers Back" and the discussion of Robert Glück's 1994 novel, *Margery Kempe*. As Dinshaw summarizes the fusion, "Bob is a San Francisco fag, and he loves too much, and the mismatch between Margery and her world is what allows him to make her story his as well. What Glück sees in Margery is excessiveness born of that disjunction, 'A greed for more life'—and he finds a culture of excess to which her story is suited: late twentieth-century gay male America. In Bob/Margery, there is a powerful urge for sex and more sex; there is the romance of identification with a lover; there is the high camp drama of an intense love affair . . . the engulfing, shattering affair between Margery and Jesus is assimilated to Bob's ill-fated love affair with his rich boyfriend."⁴ Such subtle praxis, the fusing of disparate elements for a political intent, is eloquently mirrored throughout Dinshaw's book.

As a medievalist, I want to touch briefly on the fusion of this work with my own. For nearly a decade I have been working with, reading,

³For one of the first challenges to context as a given, see Jonathan Culler's *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), esp. xiv. Culler prefers to avoid the use of the word *context* altogether and uses instead the expression *framing the sign*, claiming that it "eludes the incipient positivism of 'context'" (p. ix).

⁴Dinshaw, 165.

and translating a body of texts called *Nonnenbücher*, or “Nuns’ Books,” written by cloistered women in southern Germany and Switzerland. This corpus of fourteenth-century convent literature narrates a wide array of spiritual practices, including extreme self-mortification, flagellation, and fasting, as well as experiences of rapture and ecstasy articulated in the erotic imagery of bride mysticism or the maternal imagery of mother mysticism. Much more than idiosyncratically recollected images of the interior life of the soul’s journey to God, the texts, when taken together, can be said to represent a textual community while painting the portraits of nearly four hundred individual cloistered women. Like the marvelous constellation of texts Carolyn Dinshaw uses to build communities across time, these *vitae* touch us by narrating images of community life, of loving friendships, and of power structures; they represent an intersection of the personal and the collective.

One *vita* written in 1378, that of two Bavarian nuns named Margaret and Katherine, narrates an intense and intimate relationship between two women; I would like to frame my comments on Dinshaw’s work with reference to their particular loving friendship. Their ecstasies and raptures are shared experiences just as the stories of their lives share a single *vita*. It opens with this description:

In the year of our Lord 1315 there was a cloister in Bavaria in which very poor and simple women lived, who were very practised at singing and reading and saying devotional prayers. And in the same time there lived two very beautiful well-disposed aristocratic maidens who were almost thirteen years old and who had lived with one another from childhood. They were dear playmates, dearest friends, and what one knew the other also knew. . . .⁵

At the age of thirteen, they decide together not to marry the men their parents have chosen. Instead, they solemnly promise themselves to Christ as their betrothed, take vows before an image of the crucifix, and return announcing this to their parents. Once their parents are convinced that they have no other recourse, the two are allowed to enter the cloister and are assigned two newly built cells next to one another. As the *vita* says, “[T]hey made a door through the wall as if it were one cell because of their great desire to always be near one another.” Their fellow sisters did not perceive this deep and very particular friendship as an obstacle to devotion. On the contrary, the text makes it clear that their fellow sisters saw it not only as the source of Margaret and Katherine’s earnest devotional

⁵From “Von Zwei bairischen Klosterfrauen,” in *Sieben bisher unveröffentlichte Traktate und Lektionen*, ed. Philipp Strauch, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1927), 1–21 (my translation).

practices, but also as a source of delight for the convent as a whole. The author says that “as time went on all the women in the cloister came to love both these young women dearly allowing them to read and to live as they wanted.”⁶

The *vita* also goes on to describe the ecstatic experiences shared by Margaret and Katherine, one in particular that occurred when they were thirty years old. Just before Lent, on Shrove Tuesday, they discussed together how they would celebrate with their professed bridegroom, Christ. They decided to flagellate each other with iron rods until they bled profusely, and afterward were transfixed by a clear, bright light that lasted for several days. The following Sunday, the prioress noticed their absence and asked the sisters if anyone had seen them. She hired a blacksmith to force open their cell door, only to find them sitting together in a trance, each with a rose garland on her head. She did not wake them but removed the garlands, which, by the way, took on the significance of convent relics and were placed in the reliquary room. Margaret and Katherine continued to live together for forty more years. They died within nine days of each other and were buried together; shortly thereafter, when holy oil flowed from the grave, the prioress asked that their *vita* be written down as a blessing for the whole convent.

Such narratives connect my work with the thread of *Getting Medieval*. Whenever I have used the Margaret and Katherine *vita* in classes, the students invariably race to discuss the implicit lesbian relationship. Also, they are typically repulsed by what they perceive to be a sadomasochistic erotic ecstasy. I wonder if or how this moment between Katherine and Margaret relates to interactions that take place between Jack and Tyler in a contemporary popular film narrative—that of *The Fight Club*. Here, two men, disenchanted with the misery of their lives, seek an ecstatic connection through a homoerotic dance of violence. In fact, they beat each other senseless. In her Coda, Dinshaw identifies the source of the title, the lines spoken by a character in the film *Pulp Fiction*. Dinshaw talks of sodomy and sadomasochism in male-male relations in terms of the “desire for the transcendent and essential identity” even as a “preoccupation deeply intertwined in Western culture.”⁷

One thing is certain: just as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) would find reason to ridicule and diminish such research, so also would the Canadian granting council, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Each year when the awards for scholarly research projects are announced, the so-called absurd projects are identified in the *Globe and Mail*. During a recent election in Canada, Ted

⁶“Zwei bairischen Klosterfrauen,” 1–2.

⁷Dinshaw, 191.

White, a conservative member of Parliament campaigning against the expenditures of academic research funding, said, “[A]lthough I do not question that some of the research funded by the SSHRC has been quite constructive and forward-looking, I also know that much of it is not. For example, I cannot conceive of any way in which research in the fields of fine arts, classical studies, philosophy, anthropology, modern languages and literature, or medieval studies which together accounted for over \$5.3 million in grants in the last fiscal year, contributes to any understanding of Canadian society or the challenges we face as we enter the 21st century. Research into such fields as far as my constituents are concerned constitutes a personal past-time, and has no benefit to Canadian taxpayers. As their representative I cannot justify funding such activities with their tax dollars.”⁸ Such remarks from the political right parallel Dinshaw’s discussion of the NEH and the culture wars of the United States—potent stuff for a rage attack. Dinshaw tells her readers that she first presented ideas central to the book at an NEH Summer Institute at Notre Dame in 1995, titled “Sex and Gender in the Middle Ages.” Out of the spirit of a virulent anti-intellectualism, U.S. Congressman Steven Chabot decried the “spending of \$135,000 for 24 college teachers to travel to a summer institute to chat about sex and gender in the Middle Ages.”⁹ Again, fusing historical moments, and in an effort to build communities, thinking not only about the past but about the present and future, Dinshaw asserts that “history is both incommensurate with and mimetic of our era.”¹⁰

One question emerges for me after thinking about Dinshaw’s call to build postmodern communities and coalitions. I certainly embrace the idea, and I too desire to “participate in building coalitions in which such abjected figures as queers and scholars of early periods are armed and empowered in the fray of culture wars, not merely tolerated as a liberal free-speech cause or resolutely sunk in some distant dark past.”¹¹ I take to heart Dinshaw’s ardency for medievalists to build communities across time. But, I also take very seriously the plurality—the indeterminate nature of all cultural phenomena—of which community is only an element. So, one question I am left with, as I continue to puzzle out a sense of nontransgressive interaction with authors writing some 650 years ago, is whether our notions of community are commensurate, whether they are mutually constitutive.

⁸From *North Shore News*, Vancouver, B.C., 27 November 2000. I am grateful to the Canadian Federation of Students, especially Hattie Aitken, a Student Union fieldworker who sent this through the listserv Art History and Communication Studies (AHCSNET), and to Joan Nicks, Professor of Communication Studies, Brock University, who passed it along to me in preparation for this review.

⁹Dinshaw, 175.

¹⁰Dinshaw, 167.

¹¹Dinshaw, 182.

The closest I come to an answer is from Walter Benjamin, and I will conclude my comments with two brief citations from Benjamin. The first is a footnote in *Getting Medieval* and suggests the urgency of Carolyn Dinshaw's project: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger."¹² The second, also from "Theses on the Philosophy of History," is wholly representative of my reading of Dinshaw's book: "History is the object of a construction whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]."¹³ In the presence of this *Jetztzeit*, I thank Carolyn Dinshaw for *getting medieval*.

¹²Dinshaw, 218 n. 47; from Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

¹³Translated and quoted by Sigrid Weigel in *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.