The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages

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CAROLYN DINSHAW'S *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* is a book of such complexity and richness that it is only after two readings (and numerous runs through sections of particular interest to me in the context of my own current research) that I'm beginning to glimpse how it all, quite wonderfully, comes together. For me, perhaps the most striking and exciting aspect of the book is its articulation of a queer desire "for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time."[1] In her assessment of the queer historian's task, Dinshaw argues persuasively that the choices "are not limited simply to mimetic identification with the past or blanket alteritism, the two mutually exclusive positions that have come to be associated with [John] Boswell and [Michel] Foucault."[2] Rather, following Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, Dinshaw argues that there is always an "alterity within mimesis itself," a "never-perfect aspect of identification" that engenders both historical difference (and at times pleasure in that difference) and "partial connections, queer relations between" these "incommensurate lives and phenomena" (another source of possible pleasure).[3] With "the new pieces of history" that she explores in *Getting Medieval,* Dinshaw "shows that queers can make new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality."[4]

What is specifically queer about these partial connections? Dinshaw argues that queerness is itself contingent and historical; queerness "is not a hard and fast quality that I know in advance, but is a relation to a norm, and both the norm and the particular queer lack of fit will vary according to specific instances."[5] She goes on to argue that "a queer history will be about

[1]Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 21.

[2]Dinshaw, 34.

[3]Dinshaw, 35.

[4]Dinshaw, 39.

[5]Dinshaw, 39.

the body because it is about sex," thereby specifying the norms in relationship to which queerness is articulated as one's dealing with sex/sexuality.[6] Her move from the language of gayness, homosexuality, and/or same-sex desire to that of queerness depends on this conception of the queer as that which defies the norm and the normative, although the relationship between the two sets of terms is not fully articulated. (Are gayness, homosexuality, and same-sex desires subsets of the queer? And if this is so, are they in danger, as Leo Bersani argues, of disappearing within the larger category?)[7] At least one reason for this shift is historical: it seemingly enables Dinshaw to bypass the vexed issue of whether there were in fact "homosexuals" or "lesbians" before the nineteenth century and the concomitantly presumed distinction between acts and identity on which this Foucaultian argument rests.[8] At the same time, it allows her to include within the category of the "queer" a woman like Margery Kempe whose sexual imagery remained resolutely heterosexual, even as her actions often worked against the "norm."

Yet, is "queerness," understood as a deviation from the norm, itself susceptible to the kind of transhistorical analysis—the enabling and uncovering of partial connections across time—in which Dinshaw engages in *Getting Medieval*? The concepts of the norm, normalcy, normality, abnormality, and normativity as we now understand them first appeared in the nineteenth century and were tied to concrete developments in statistical analysis and its application to the social sciences. Statistical modes of analysis emerged in the early-modern period as a form of "political arithmetic" for the "promotion of sound, well-informed state policy"[9] and were transferred in the early nineteenth century to the field of medicine. "The application of numbers," an early medical statistician argues, can "illustrate the natural history of health and disease."[10] As Lennard Davis argues in his important book, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body,* the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1847) most

[6]Dinshaw, 39. On the complex relationship between the terms "sex," "sexuality," and "gender," see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 27–35.

[7]See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[8]On the specific problems that emerge for medievalists in writing the history of lesbianism, see Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9: 1–24 (2000).

[9]Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking 1820–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 18. Cited in Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 26. Also see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[10]Francis Bisset Hawkins, *Elements of Medical Statistics* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1829), cited by Davis, 26.

clearly delineated a conception of the statistical norm as an imperative (i.e., as normative). As Davis explains, Quetelet

> noticed that the "law of error," used by astronomers to locate a star by plotting all the sightings and then averaging the errors, could be equally applied to the distribution of human features such as height and weight. He then took a further step of formulating the concept of the "l'homme moyen," or the average man. Quetelet maintained that this abstract human was the average of all human attributes in a given country.[11]

The development of a "social physics" was dependent, Quetelet asserted, on this conception of a physically and morally average human construct.

For Davis, the embrace of the average or the norm as "a kind of ideal, a position devoutly to be wished" marks a paradoxical shift from earlier conceptions of the ideal as an impossible and unattainable composite of all that is best in human beings. The eugenicist and statistician, Sir Francis Galton (a cousin of Charles Darwin), dealt with this apparent dilemma by moving from the language of "error" to that of "normal distribution," in which the extremes on a standard bell curve are read not as errors but as deviations. At the same time he argued that both extremes were not necessarily equally deviant, "substituting the idea of ranking for the concept of averaging," at least for some categories of analysis. By dividing the standard bell curve into quartiles and reversing the gradient of the third and fourth quartiles, he posited the highest degree of upward deviation as a new kind of ideal (particularly with regard to features like intelligence). Yet as Davis argues, this statistical ideal remains "unlike the classical ideal, which contains no imperative to be the ideal. The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be."[12]

The concepts of the norm, normality, and abnormality are even more deeply marked by contradiction in the well-entrenched alliance between social and medical statistics and eugenics. As Davis argues, following Donald MacKenzie's 1981 study, *Statistics in Britain, 1865–1930,* "[T]here is a real connection between figuring the statistical measure of humans and then hoping to improve humans so that deviations from the norm diminish."[13] However, this desire to "norm" the population is by definition impossible since "the inviolable rule of statistics is that all phenomena

[11]Davis, 26.
[12]Davis, 35.
[13]Davis, 30.

will always conform to a bell curve."[14] In other words, there will always be individuals who fall below or above the mean, despite the apparent (to eugenicists, at least) malleability and perfectibility of the human body and moral character.[15] For Davis, even psychoanalysis, with its central (although also constantly challenged) concepts of normality and abnormality, is touched by this progressivist, eugenicist strand: "[I]t is instructive to think about the ways in which Freud is producing a eugenics of the mind—creating the concepts of normal sexuality, normal function, and then contrasting them with the perverse, abnormal, pathological, and even criminal."[16]

The terms used to designate this shift in the management of human society and social beings—"norm," "normal," "normative"—all derive from the Latin *norma,* a square used by carpenters, builders, and surveyors to obtain a right angle. The meaning of *norma* extends figuratively to refer to a rule, pattern, or precept (of practice or behavior).[17] The question for further research, then, is whether *norma* was used in relationship to sexuality or sexual behavior in the Middle Ages. Recent studies suggest that the determining term for sexuality is *natura,* with sexual activity judged according to whether it is natural or against nature.[18] (The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* gives an example in which *natura* is said to have *norma,* suggesting a link between the two terms that should be further explored.) As Joan Cadden argues with regard to Peter of Abano's early-fourteenth-century commentary on Aristotle's *Problemata,* however, the meaning (and value) of *natura* is not self-evident, even in the Middle Ages, for Peter distinguishes between anatomical and psychological articulations of maleness and then "blurs the distinction by reducing habit to nature."[19] Dinshaw traces a

[14]Davis, 30.

[15]Although, as Sedgwick reminds us, the ties between conceptions of normality and eugenics shouldn't cause us to lose sight of the sometimes profoundly efficacious political and social power of claims to normality on the part of gay men and women. See Sedgwick, 58.

[16]Davis, 39.

[17]This would seem to be the basis of the French and English use of the term "normal" to mean "certified" or "approved," hence normal schools for institutions to train teachers. Michael Warner suggests, following Georges Canguilhem, that contemporary uses of the term "normal" rest "on a confusion between statistical norms and evaluative norms." I think this is right, but Davis's point, with which I also agree, is that this confusion—which creates intractable contradictions, as Warner points out—is endemic to the concept of normativity itself. Note that the term "normalize" only arises *after* the rise of statistics and with reference to that science. See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 56.

[18]The central reference is to Paul's Letter to the Romans. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Joan Cadden, *The Meaning of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[19]Joan Cadden, "Sciences/Silences: The Natures and Languages of 'Sodomy' in Peter of Abano's *Problemata* Commentary," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality,* ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 52.

similar elision between the natural and the unnatural (or perhaps better, a naturalizing of the unnatural) in the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* and the poem appended to it.[20]

I'm not sure how much to make of this potential gap between modern conceptions of the norm and medieval understandings of *natura,* but I'd like to suggest that it may contribute to some of the complexities—and arguably the need for even greater complexity—in Dinshaw's reading of Margery Kempe. Attending to the gap between modern and medieval concepts even as we attempt to make them touch is itself, as Dinshaw shows, historically illuminating. Dinshaw at first seems to extend her conception of queerness beyond the strictly sexual, finding in Margery's distinctive clothing and, less prominently (perhaps because less easily tied to sexuality), her tears and shouts a clash with the "normative heterosexual expectations of her community in Lynn."[21] As this phrase suggests, Kempe's clothing is itself a mark of sexuality, or perhaps better, of her refusal to engage in sexual activity with her husband or any other human partner. By wearing white, moreover, Kempe sartorially claims a virgin status unavailable to her as a wife and mother of thirteen. Dinshaw reads the distressed responses of political and religious leaders and other observers as a response to Kempe's deviation from the norm—the expected heterosexual, procreative sexuality of the emergent bourgeois society in which Kempe lives.

A passage central to Dinshaw's analysis occurs when Kempe appears before the mayor of Leicester, who accuses her of being "a false strumpet, a false lollard, and a false deceiver of the people."[22] After a series of charges and countercharges—that may include hidden allusions to sexual misconduct and/or sodomy—the mayor tells Kempe: "I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you."[23] Dinshaw, reading this passage in relationship to the Lollard Eleventh Conclusion, in which women who take vows of chastity are accused of engaging in female homosexual acts, sees it as evidence for a possible charge of "queerness" in relationship to normative heterosexuality—specified here, she suggests, as same-sex relations. Yet the passage, like the interchange between Margery and the archbishop of York, in which he accuses her of advising "my Lady Greystoke

[20]Dinshaw, 55–87. For a similar slide between the natural and the unnatural, see Sedgwick's discussion of *Billy Budd:* "'A depravity according to nature,' like 'natural depravity,' might denote something that is depraved when measured against the external standard of nature—that is, something whose depravity is unnatural. Either of the same two phrases might also denote, however, something whose proper nature is to be depraved—that is, something whose depravity is natural" (p. 95).

[21]Dinshaw, 147.

[22]Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. Sanford Meech Brown and Hope Emily Allen, EETS 212 (1940; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 112. Cited in Dinshaw, 153. Dinshaw cites Kempe's Middle English, which I have here modernized. Elsewhere, she cites both the Middle English and the modern English translation by B. A. Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1985).

[23]Kempe, 116; and Windeatt, 153. Cited in Dinshaw, 155.

to leave her husband,"[24] seems tied as much to fears of a potentially widespread refusal of heterosexuality as of possible same-sex activity. (One of the things that texts like the Lollard Eleventh Conclusion do is blur this distinction.) Kempe, in embracing chastity and claiming something similar to virginal status despite her marriage and motherhood, endangers the heterosexual bond by suggesting, through her words and actions, that the "highest estate" is available to lay women, married women, and women not tied to specific religious orders or enclosed within convent walls. It's precisely her pursuit of this religious ideal that makes her "abnormal" in modern terms. But would these be terms available to and/or recognized by her contemporaries, for whom virginity and the refusal of human-on-human sex is itself posited as a religious ideal? Dinshaw recognizes this problem and argues that part of Kempe's "queerness" lies in her inability to fit the saintly molds to which she aspires. She is queer in relationship both to heterosexual norms and to saintly ideals. Dinshaw bases this claim on the responses to Kempe's actions recorded in the *Book* and on the apparent over-physicality of her desire. Yet the forms of sanctity that Kempe imitates, particularly those found in the lives of continental holy women from the thirteenth century, are themselves intensely physical. They are often marked, moreover, by trials and persecutions, both spiritually and bodily, which demonstrate the holy woman's commonality with Christ in his suffering exile. Kempe's account of her continual persecution at the hands of those less devout than herself might easily be read as following these saintly patterns. In other words, it is not clear to me that Kempe "fails" in the way modern readers so often insist that she does. Most concrete, we should remember that Kempe did have supporters and was able to escape condemnation, withstand her enemies, and produce her book.

More crucial perhaps, for Dinshaw, Kempe "is not and cannot be satisfied without touching Christ, but that *is* after all something that is beyond her range."[25] Yet many medieval people, including Kempe, believed that it *was* possible for some human beings to touch Christ, not only through the Eucharist, which was available to all Christians, but also in extraordinary experiences of the divine presence. One of the central dilemmas in the women's mystical literature and mystical hagiographies written about women in the later Middle Ages is what to do when Christ's extraordinary presence is lost, as it inevitably must be as long as one remains in the body. Some of these women attempted to resolve the dilemma by rejecting the centrality of the physical. But certainly not all of them did, particularly as male church leadership increasingly insisted on the visibility and physicality of women's sanctity (even as this enabled them to judge some physical phenomena as illnesses or possessions rather than as marks of the divine).

[24]Kempe, 133; and Windeatt, 712. Cited in Dinshaw, 156.
[25]Dinshaw, 163.

For Dinshaw, finally, "Margery's whole story is a record of her inability to will that tactile contact or accept its inaccessibility—she is unable finally to write herself out of her earthly community and into a spiritual one, just (and for the same reason) as she is unable to remake her body as virginal again."[26] Yet Kempe, who is unable to understand how Mary Magdalene could bear the risen Christ's command that she not touch him, understands herself as touching and touched by Christ continually throughout her life. She doesn't have to accept the inaccessibility of his touch, because her life, as she tells it, is full of Christ's presence, just as his command that she wear white marks *his* remaking of her body as virginal.[27] The "drag" on Kempe's spiritual/material possibilities arguably comes not from herself or from Christ, but rather from those who refuse to accept the genuineness of her experiences of Christ's presence and her rebirth within him. The ecclesial and political world's—as well the modern reader's—"interpretation of her body" is itself a battle over sanctity and over who is sanctioned to interpret women's bodies and their claims to holiness. Kempe's survival and that of her book suggest that in this battle of interpretation, she was more successful than modern readers, with their presumptions about what counts as mysticism and holiness—or simply about what is possible—might be able to see. In other words, perhaps the intensity of Kempe's certainty that she touched and was touched by the divine is precisely what makes her so "abnormal," so "queer" to modern readers—those of us for whom the category of the "norm" still has tremendous prescriptive power.[28]

[26]Dinshaw, 163–64.

[27]The issue for some of Margery's contemporaries, as for Dinshaw, may be that Margery claims too much. Perhaps the excess of her desire and her claims to achievement of the ideal make her "queer" in relationship to her contemporaries. Yet women's religious writings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are full of such excesses. Whether these women and their texts were positively received by their contemporaries seemed dependent on something other and more complex than the degree of excess to their claims.

[28]Sedgwick remarks on the narrowing of what counts as salient about sexuality in the modern period. Perhaps this focus on sexual-object choice is related to the need to make sexual norms available to statistical analysis. Seen from this perspective, there might be a relationship between Kempe's desire to have God as a sexual partner and a certain modern inability to see that as a viable normal *or* abnormal form of sexuality. See Sedgwick, 8–9.